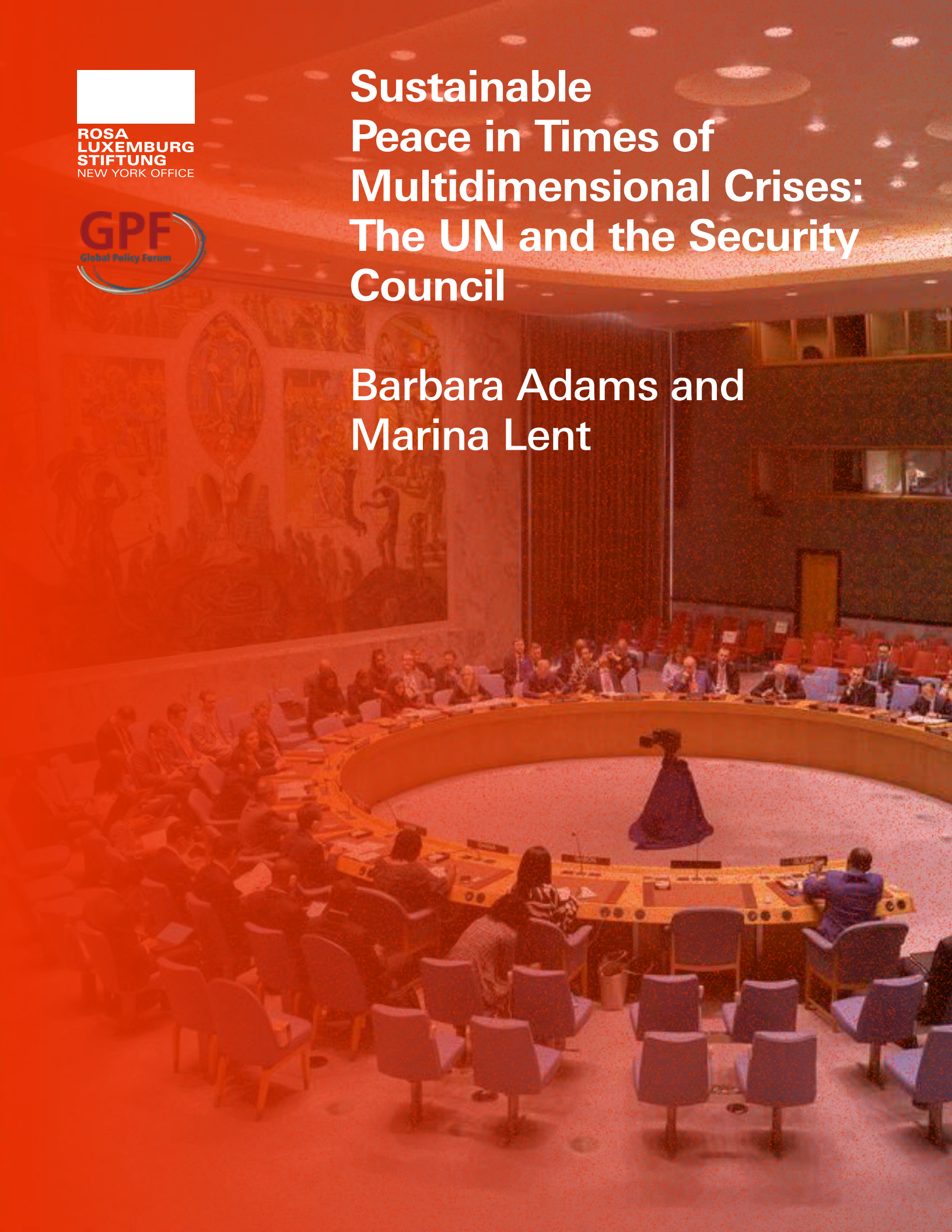


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# Sustainable Peace in Times of Multidimensional Crises: The UN and the Security Council

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# Sustainable Peace in Times of Multidimensional Crises: The UN and the Security Council

By Barbara Adams and Marina Lent



A wide view of the Security Council meeting on the Sudan and South Sudan, June 15, 2023..

## Executive Summary

Failure of the UN Security Council to live up to its mandate and effectively address lack of security among nations and promote lasting peace is having a cascade effect on confidence in and standing of multilateralism and the UN system. [Succinctly put by President of the UN General Assembly Csaba Kőrösi](#) (UNGA): “To the outside world we are One UN. One UN that must deliver on the promise to ensure global peace and security.”

“Such failures have eroded trust and led many to question the viability and legitimacy of the Security Council but also the legitimacy of the UN system itself,” Costa Rica noted in the UNGA session on use of the veto on April 26, 2023. “We cannot afford trust in multilateralism to fade away.”

The mainly national self-interested use of the veto by the five permanent members (P5), the non-representative Security Council (SC) membership, P5 domination of processes including the Security Council agenda and certain high-ranking UN appointments (primarily that of the Secretary-General) have long been understood and acknowledged by most UN Member States. Reform of the UN—including the Security Council and General Assembly—has been on the UN agenda for decades, with little to show for it. But the recent accumulation of failings and inadequacies of the UN, as in international cooperation and global governance more generally, is spurring perceptible political energy and urgency among most member states to press forward in ways big and small to make substantive changes.

Momentum is palpable on many fronts, notably in the UNGA. “Do you want a General Assembly that complements the work of the (Security) Council, being more active on specific situations, as it has done in the past? Do you want the General Assembly to take decisions, consider concrete recommendations and send these back to the Council? Which direction do you think we should go?” asked the UNGA President at the debate on the issue of the veto. “The issue of the use of the veto affects the whole UN. And the decisions taken in these halls—or the lack of decisions—reverberate world-wide.”

This momentum toward reform has been particularly noticeable in the recent meetings of the UNGA’s Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) process, as well as on initiatives triggered by paralysis in the Security Council over the conflict in Ukraine.

On April 26, 2022, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution (A/RES/76/262): Standing mandate for a General Assembly debate when a veto is cast in the Security Council. Often referred to as “the veto initiative,” the resolution calls for Security Council accountability by convening a formal meeting of the General Assembly within 10 working days of a veto disabling the Security Council’s ability to act. It requires the Council to issue a report to the General Assembly, and the Assembly to deliberate on the matter, with priority given to hearing from the relevant veto-wielding state.

Spearheaded by Liechtenstein and co-sponsored by 38 Member States, UNGA RES/76/262 was adopted without a vote. The General Assembly has met four times in sessions as provided for by the resolution.

On April 26, 2023, one year to the day from the adoption of the resolution, the GA Plenary met on Item 60 of its Agenda, entitled “Use of the Veto”. In addition to strong support for the improvement in accountability represented

by resolution, the debate also demonstrated widespread support among Member States for further initiatives to curb use of the veto, with several states stating a preference, despite obvious obstacles, for abolition of the veto entirely.

In the IGN meetings, governments have been calling for a variety of measures:

- reining in the use of the veto;
- expansion of SC membership to the point where it proportionally reflects Member States of the world;
- supporting more effective, dynamic and inclusive participation of elected SC members;
- creating accountability of the SC to the entire UN membership via its mandated annual report to the GA; and
- increasing both the formal and informal interaction of the Security Council and General Assembly, viewing them as complementary, rather than running on separate tracks.

Many States, including Japan on behalf of the G4 group of aspiring permanent Council members (Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan), hold that “adequate regional representation can be achieved only by expanding both permanent and non-permanent categories.” Other Member States argue that entrenching advantage and privilege of powerful countries through the expansion of permanent membership, especially with veto powers, operates against the principle of equality of member states and will disable the Security Council even further.

What permeates deliberations is the need to reorient multilateralism, including the Security Council, toward accountability and responsibility. It is said time and again by States: the veto is not a privilege; it is a responsibility. The responsibility is toward a) the principles of the UN Charter; b) UN member states as a collective on behalf of whom the SC is empowered by the UN Charter to act; and c) creating peace and security. Although many countries aspire to see the end of the Council veto powers, current veto holders can easily prevent this.

The Secretary-General convened the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism (HLAB), which is composed of former heads of state and government as well as leaders from civil society, the private sector, and academia, to address the full range of global governance from macroeconomics to security issues to the trust deficit. The HLAB has called for the General Assembly to take on a larger role if the Security Council cannot or will not act in the face of threats to international security. Liechtenstein, in

the GA debate on “use of the veto,” highlighted the importance of “enhancing the role of the Assembly on matters of peace and security,” and noted that “We are grateful to see that the High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism has built upon this theme in its report ‘A Breakthrough for People and Planet.’”

In anticipation of the lack of unity in the Security Council for the foreseeable future, Liechtenstein has emphasized that a “General Assembly that is active in the area of peace and security is therefore key to ensure the thriving multilateralism envisaged by the Charter.” Costa Rica articulated more forcefully the responsibility of the Member States of the General Assembly: “It is incumbent upon the General Assembly – where every Member State is a Permanent Member – to ensure that the Security Council’s Permanent Members’ ineptitude does not bring the whole UN system down with it. We can do this by ensuring this chamber [GA] maintains a culture of integrity, vigilance, and custodial duty that matches the gravity of the UN’s mandate.”

In addition to ongoing efforts to reform the Security Council itself, initiatives have been taken to broaden the intergovernmental mandates and strengthen the capacity of the international community to support the peace agenda. The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) was established in 2005 by resolutions of both the General Assembly and the Security Council to advise both bodies on an integrated approach to peacebuilding and act as a bridge between the principal intergovernmental UN organs, regional organizations, national and local government officials, and civil society sectors. Since its inception, the PCB has engaged with 23 countries and regions to address political, socio-economic and security challenges in conflict-affected situations. This orientation provides valuable experience to build on for confronting the newer, more complex drivers of conflict in today’s world.

Most States recognize that multilateralism will continue to be jeopardized and undermined without Security Council reform. But positions differ on reform priorities and not all States go beyond paying lip service to the principle that multilateralism needs to be founded on the ability to act for the common good, for the long term, and on the basis of universal rights and principles.

These positions boil down to the difference between multilateralism viewed as a “balance of interests” proposition versus building multilateral peace and security work on the sovereign equality of members states united for the common good. This is articulated clearly by smaller states, who are only too aware that, in a “balance of interests” model, no matter how the system is structured, the interests of the powerful invariably outweigh those of less

powerful states. As the HLAB report puts it, “a radical shift in our approach to global governance” is needed.

With great opportunity comes great risk. It is critical to get this right. A true breakthrough is needed to achieve the kind of multilateralism capable of counteracting and equitably addressing existential global threats such as ecological devastation, pandemics, conflict, famine and mass mortality, with priority given to the most vulnerable first, rather than to the most powerful. If the change that is decided on in the next few years does not succeed in shifting the fundamental orientation of multilateral governance, the opportunity of this heightened political moment will have been lost.

## Scene-setting

The Security Council has a poor track record of ensuring international peace and security, as charged under the UN Charter. The Security Council came into existence at a time when peace and security was considered in terms of military incursions across national borders. It represented the political agreement needed to keep the US in the global power game and was informed by elements leading to failure of the League of Nations.

Today, there is ever greater recognition that the nature of conflict and threats to peace and security have changed. The United Nations is confronted with a staggering agenda of interlocking crises of, among others, climate, food, health and armed conflict. As of 2020, there were 37 fragile or conflict-affected countries with urgent health care, education and shelter needs, which lack fiscal space, and are trapped in agreements where servicing ever-escalating debt precedes and undermines protecting human rights and providing essential public services. Their situation is only the most extreme, as sound health care, solid and consistent education for all children and youth, and secure, effective protection of human rights for all residents has become the exception rather than the rule among nations.

These crises have deepened pre-existing inequalities, both within and among countries. In turn, they have exposed another crisis: that of multilateralism and global governance embedded in institutions established before most UN Member States were politically independent, notably the Security Council and the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs).

Failure of the Security Council structure is evident to all, and is perhaps the most glaring illustration of a generalized failure of multilateral decision-making to address even the most obvious existential threats. The latest report

of the IPCC on Climate Change echoes the theme of the UN Secretary-General's [Our Common Agenda](#): we will not get another chance. Is this a sign of a breakdown or a possible breakthrough?

What is the role and purpose of multilateralism in addressing this turning point for people and the planet? The existing decision-making mechanisms and structures are barely capable of maintaining stability, never mind trying to produce even marginal shifts toward equity.

After decades of addressing these multiple challenges in separate tracks and sectors, UN leadership, with active engagement of the UN General Assembly, has launched a process based on the Secretary-General's report [Our Common Agenda](#) that has called for a number of inter-governmental meetings and summits in search of more transformative outcomes. Prominent are the SDG Summit in September 2023 and the Summit of the Future in September 2024.

To support the process with analysis and proposals, the Secretary-General convened a [High-Level Advisory Board on Effective Multilateralism](#) (HLAB), composed of former heads of state and government as well as leaders from civil society, the private sector and academia, to address the full range of global governance from macroeconomics to security issues to the trust deficit. The Secretary-General is also producing a series of [policy briefs](#) that address key issues for a vibrant multilateralism. These are under review in intergovernmental working groups in preparation for upcoming summits in 2023 and 2024.

## Recent Developments in the Security Council / General Assembly Relationship

The HLAB report, published in the spring of 2023, does not mince words with respect to the current repute of the Security Council:

Today's UN Security Council is the highest profile example of failure in the multilateral system. Dominated by a small number of States and hampered by geopolitical polarisation, it has proven itself unable to respond to major risks to international peace and security. Without meaningful reform, the Security Council risks irrelevance.

Decades of discussion around reform of the Security Council had degenerated into endless repetition of appeals for increasing membership, better



representation of regions, and greater relevance for today's challenges to lasting peace and meaningful security.

Our leaders have repeatedly tasked us with delivering early and comprehensive reform of the Security Council — a task that after years of textless, fruitless deliberations in the intergovernmental negotiations on Security Council reform, remains not only unfulfilled but also blocked by those perpetuating the outdated status quo. In effect, a vocal minority of naysayers have held the entire process of Security Council reform hostage over the past four decades.

India (discussion upon adoption of 76/262, A/76/PV.69)

Triggered by paralysis in the Security Council over the conflict in Ukraine, on 26 April 2022, the 76th UN General Assembly (UNGA) adopted a resolution directly addressing the issue of the veto. Resolution A/RES/76/262, often referred to as “the veto initiative,” calls for Security Council accountability by convening a special session of the General Assembly when a veto has disabled the Security Council's ability to act. It requires the Council to issue a report to the General Assembly, and the Assembly to deliberate on the matter, with priority given to hearing from the relevant veto-wielding state. Spearheaded by Liechtenstein, UNGA RES/76/262 was adopted without a vote.

Increasingly, Member States and others are stressing the appropriateness of action by the General Assembly, in accordance with its Charter mandate, when the Security Council is unable to act, as opposed to allowing Security Council paralysis to disable the entire multilateral system.

Costa Rica has supported ‘the veto initiative’ from its inception. And, despite the fact that the initiative has only been in place for a year, we can already identify three significant contributions. Firstly, the UN's critical work on international peace and security is now able to continue despite paralysis in the UN Security Council. When parts of the UN system are unable to fulfil their mandate, the veto initiative gives this chamber the opportunity to step into the breach, to rise above political theatre and unite for peace and the protection of the United Nations Charter. Before the veto initiative, a veto cast could paralyse the United Nations as a whole. Instead of acting, a veto compelled the United Nations to watch multiple crises emerge from the sidelines. The impact of this political paralysis is devastating and civilians around the world pay the cost.

Costa Rica (Item 60, 26 April 2023)

And HLAB authors concluded that “[i]f the Security Council cannot or will not act in the face of threats to international security, then the matter should immediately be placed before the General Assembly for action.” The extreme danger of passively allowing these threats to continue to spread and gain ever more momentum becomes more and more obvious.

Certainly, recent prominent Security Council failures to even address, let alone mitigate or resolve, military conflicts that have been accompanied by manifestly hideous destruction and suffering of civilian populations in Yemen, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere have driven this point home - even to those who hew to a narrow original definition of “security” as the absence of military incursions over sovereign state boundaries. The more blatant the pursuit of national self-interest on the part of the great powers, the less defensible is the status quo.

The goal of current steps to strengthen the General Assembly in relation to the Council is a bigger project than at first it might seem. It requires taking into consideration the tentacles or “cascade” of disproportionate influence originating in the Charter-endowed advantage of power imbalance, as reflected in permanent membership and veto in the Security Council. The “chill factor” of this advantage/privilege reaches far into many parts of the UN system in ways formal, informal by customary practice, and hidden “arm-twisting”.

## Taming the Veto

Ultimately co-sponsored by 38 Member States, A/RES/76/262 provides that, “the President of the General Assembly shall convene a formal meeting of the General Assembly within 10 working days of the casting of a veto by one or more permanent members of the Security Council”. This not only creates a form of accountability but also an expectation and the responsibility for putting forward effective alternative ways to bring about peace and security in the specific instance under consideration, despite its being vetoed in the Council. In the past year, the General Assembly has met four times in sessions as provided for by Resolution 76/262.

On 26 April 2023, one year to the day from the adoption of GA RES/76/262, the GA Plenary met on Item 60 of its Agenda, entitled “Use of the Veto”. In addition to strong support for the improvement in accountability represented by Resolution 76/262, the debate also demonstrated widespread support among Member States for further initiatives to curb use of the veto, with a number of states stating a preference, despite obvious obstacles, for abolition of the veto entirely.

Italy points out that the veto “is often abused to cover up serious breaches of the UN Charter”, while Ecuador states that “the use of the veto has not favored a safer world, but a less safe one. For this reason, in the reform process of the Security Council, Ecuador ...opposes the extension of the veto and we insist that it focus rather on its limitation”, and Argentina calls to mind its longstanding opposition to the institution of the veto:

Since the negotiations of the San Francisco Conference in 1945, Argentina established a very firm position against the veto, because it understands that said privilege is in violation of the principle of sovereign equality between States and implies in fact that the State that holds this privilege has the right to annul the will of the other members of the Organization. The veto is an inefficient tool for the functioning of the Security Council. The Security Council is meant to maintain international peace and security, which it cannot do when conflicts involving any of the five permanent members frequently lead to vetoes.

And Colombia:

... after 77 years of operation of the UN, threats to international peace and security have not only not diminished, but have multiplied and diversified, calling into question the legitimacy of the multilateral system. This scenario confirms that the Security Council urgently requires a reform that allows it to produce timely, responsible and effective decisions and actions. From this perspective, Colombia insists on the need to overcome the veto, since it is an undemocratic mechanism for the current context of the United Nations. In recent times, the veto has been the main cause of gaps in multilateral attention to situations of genocide and attacks on the territorial integrity of some States, which is inadmissible. For this same reason, we also cannot accept that the Security Council reform process extends the veto power to new permanent members. (Item 60)

## Initiatives on the veto

Resolution 76/262 is not the only veto-related action put forward by Member States. Two separate but related measures were brought to the UN General Assembly in 2015 on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the United Nations. A French/Mexican statement, directed at the permanent members, proposes “a collective and voluntary agreement among the permanent members of the Security Council to the effect that the permanent members would refrain from using the veto in case of mass atrocities”.

A “Code of Conduct regarding Security Council action against genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes” of the same year was presented by Liechtenstein on behalf of the Accountability, Coherence and Transparency Group (ACT Group), with the support of countries. The Code of Conduct calls on all Security Council members to “pledge in particular to not vote against a credible draft resolution before the Security Council on timely and decisive action to end the commission of genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes, or to prevent such crimes”. The Code also invites the Secretary-General to “continue to bring to the attention of the Council situations that, in her or his assessment, involve or are likely to lead to genocide, crimes against humanity or war crimes”. As of 2022 the Code of Conduct has been signed by 121 Member States and 2 observers.

Both initiatives were highlighted by numerous countries throughout the 26 April 2023 General Assembly debate on the veto as innovative and necessary means to curb the use of the veto, with states urging that additional means to rein in the veto continue to be sought.

The veto is the acknowledged Achilles heel of democratizing the Security Council. Under provisions of the Charter, it can realistically only be incrementally adapted through moral suasion and gradually shifting norms.

The veto is the most controversial and the most debated provision of the Charter of the United Nations. It is of course also a fact of life and very likely here to stay. We can collectively mitigate its use by taking it to a very different place in the practice of the Council than the one it has been occupying for many long years. The veto must no longer be a permanent threat and possible impediment to the effectiveness of our organisation, but slowly fade away into obsolescence through a range of measures.

Liechtenstein, Item 60

## SC Reform: be careful what you wish for (IGN)

The main SC Reform arena is the General Assembly's "Intergovernmental Negotiations on the Question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council and matters related to the Security Council (IGN)". Resolution 76/262 and other related initiatives have re-energized discussions around Security Council Reform and related matters, driven by intensified involvement of the General Assembly. In addition, a number of mechanisms and proposed initiatives are gaining prominence and benefiting from the momentum toward the Summit of the Future. IGN discussions have been grouped around the five themes: categories of membership; the question of the veto; regional representation; size of an enlarged Security Council and working methods of the Council; and the relationship between the Council and the General Assembly (Decision 62/557, 2008). Of the five clusters, the interrelated issues of the veto and categories of Council membership are the most contentious. For example, would additional permanent members, if there are to be such, be seated with or without veto powers?

Recently, the IGN has taken steps to make its process more accessible to both Member States and the public, building on renewed dynamism. As of 9 March 2023, the prepared government opening statements are live-streamed and recorded, and a website has been created, showing archived

and forthcoming schedule, statements and reports relating to the work of the IGN.

On 28 April, the President of the General Assembly transmitted a letter from IGN co-chairs Kuwait and Austria to the General Assembly membership. The letter included a “Revised Co-Chairs Elements Paper on Convergences and Divergences on the question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council and related matters,” based on the IGN meetings held so far in 2023.

The paper shows universal agreement that an increase in, and better representativeness of, Security Council membership is overdue and broad agreement on egregious underrepresentation of certain groups of Member States, most of which were still under colonial rule well past the founding of the UN.

## Expansion - how far, which privileges?

While the need for increased membership and representation of the Security Council enjoys solid support, unanimity ends there. The details of exactly how to expand membership demonstrate just how complex these issues will be.

There are significant variations in member state views on expanding permanent membership. While some seek regionally balanced permanent membership, others warn against further entrenching unequal membership, and therefore for NOT expanding permanent membership. Underlying this is, of course, the question of whether permanent membership comes with veto powers.

The Africa Group, for example, is very clear on its position that additional permanent members must have all existing powers and privileges as the P5 members. The African position is solidly unified behind the Ezulwini Consensus and Sirte Declaration agreed within the African Union in 2005.

The 3 April 2023 session of the IGN addressed the cluster on “Categories of Membership” and the topics of how to rectify the Historical Injustice done to Africa; on Latin American and Asia-Pacific representation on the Council; and the Status of forthcoming IGN documents.

The [debate](#) showed broad support among member states for significant expansion of African representation on the Council, with some variation on the question of extending the veto in particular.

The African position calls for seven additional seats on the Council for the Africa Group, two of them permanent seats. While expressing a preference for the abolition of the veto, the African position is unequivocal that, if the veto is retained for the P5, it must also be extended to new permanent members, and that anything less perpetuates historical injustice. Speaking on behalf of the Africa Group, Sierra Leone laid out its position as follows:

... There can be no rectification of the historical injustice without Africa's representation in the permanent category - as the only continent within the five regional blocs of the United Nations that is not currently represented at all in this category. And there can be no fair and just representation of Africa in this category without having the Veto if it is retained. Africa has the capacity and capability to effectively participate in the decision-making process of the Security Council - and this can only be guaranteed if it wields equal decision-making powers, including the Veto to influence decisions that especially impact Africa and in the promotion of international peace and security.

Arab states straddle two UN regions, with Northern Africa in the Africa group, and countries of the Middle East as part of the Asian group. There is some recognition among member states that this puts them at a disadvantage in terms of "regional" representation, so some formulas for expansion of regional group representation specify "with one of those seats being held by an Arab state." There is also clear recognition of the need to find representation mechanisms for the LDCs and Small Island Developing States (SIDS), who would otherwise be hard pressed to compete for seats with larger, more powerful states.

Of note is the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group. Initiated in the 1990s by Italy, it strongly holds that the existing special powers granted to the P5, including permanency of membership, should not be extended to other UN member states, as this would perpetuate and entrench unequal status among UN member states, while extending the veto would reduce Council effectiveness even further. Instead, UfC seeks to invigorate the elected members, and puts forward a regionally-balanced formula which includes a certain number of seats with extended membership (members could stand for immediate re-election), while retaining two-year rotating seats as well, to allow for a larger number of UN member states to have a term on the Council. Uniting for Consensus is a group of countries from different regions of the world (Argentina, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Italy, Malta, Mexico, Pakistan, Republic of Korea, San Marino, Spain, and Türkiye).

The Group of Four (G4), made up of aspiring permanent seat-holders Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan, supported expansion of permanent seats at the 3 April IGN, stating that:

...adequate regional representation can be achieved only by expanding both permanent and non-permanent categories. Simply expanding non-permanent seats will not change but rather reconfirm the existing imbalance in the Council, and therefore not live up to the aspirations of many countries, including from Africa. This cannot be the way forward.

The Nordic countries addressed concerns about the use of the veto and how this would be impacted with permanent seat expansion:

On one hand, we recognize that new permanent members of a reformed Council would understandably demand the same powers as the sitting permanent members. On the other hand, the Nordics remain committed to ensuring a transparent, accountable and effective Council. Just introducing more permanent members with today's seemingly unbridled veto powers could potentially jeopardize these priorities. But of course today's seemingly unrestricted scope and use of the veto power does not necessarily need to be maintained tomorrow...

Non-permanent membership is also bedeviled with questions. While the strict two-year term limit of non-permanent members precludes in-depth familiarity with the workings of the Council, expanding term duration of non-permanent seats through immediate re-election acts against opportunity for more states to have a term on the SC.

In sum, it is fair to say that, while there are emerging broad areas of agreement in IGN deliberations, positions are jostling and coalescing in some areas, and remain far apart with evident fault lines in others. The disjointed, dismembered Rubik's cube of possible iterations of various facets of Security Council operations and structures is actively in play, and the only certainty is that configurations will change over the many coming months. This reform process is perceived by delegations, by and large, as a "once in a lifetime" opportunity to right wrongs and address grievances related to membership, the veto and such. While there is voiced agreement on the need for reform, positions vary dramatically on where the "goalposts" are.

However, once in a lifetime "solutions", like extending a few permanent seats, could end up making things worse (e.g., resulting in 10 veto wielding states). In other words, a Charter revision could be more damaging than helpful if it locks in the current self-perpetuating mechanisms of power through the veto.

Like any Charter revision, it should be more ambitious and aim higher than merely adding seats and veto restraints to a Chamber that is barely holding its own within the narrowest interpretations of its Charter mandate.

If the Council is to survive, and thrive, according to the mandate and principled aspirations of the Charter, two shifts could be viewed as progress:

A commitment to more regular Council reform efforts, such as a required review for continuation. Article 109 of the Charter already provides for Charter review, starting with the Charter Review conference focused on Security Council reform called for by the HLAB (p49). The General Assembly could decide to make a regular review of the UN Charter a part of its regular work programme going forward. Perhaps a High-Level Commission, and/or a standing IGN to review Council functioning and issue a document every five years or so chronicling the effectiveness and appropriateness of the current Council configuration and laying out the next iteration of needed reforms.

Strengthen the role of General Assembly in sustainable peace – ensuring that Peacebuilding Commission, for example, is able and willing to shoulder much more of the responsibility for peacebuilding and peacemaking throughout the entire trajectory of conflict from prevention through recovery.

## Peacebuilding Model and today's Complex, Global and Interrelated Drivers of Conflict

There is growing momentum around the Peacebuilding Commission, a relatively recent UN body that exemplifies a cross-cutting, “silo-busting” approach. Established in 2005 as a joint General Assembly/Security Council project, the Peacebuilding Commission is designed to advance intersectoral UN support for peacebuilding from conflict prevention through to conflict recovery and reconstruction. It aims to move toward a more integrated UN system that can support national and local efforts to address the root causes of conflict.

### **Box 1. Multiple drivers of conflict**

In addition to the risks of the continued build-up of weapons and direct military confrontation, a range of non-military factors influence human security and our collective well-being, including deepening social, economic, and political inequalities; uneven and inadequate progress on our SDGs; global shocks caused by the impacts of climate change and environmental damage; global health crises such as the pandemic; poor governance and backsliding on human rights; foreign interference in the internal affairs of States; large-scale demographic shifts and population movements; transnational organised crime and massive illicit financial flows; and transformative shocks presented by new technologies”. HLAB



The growing profile of the Peacebuilding Commission illustrates how the UN can exercise a convening and bridging role between the principal intergovernmental UN organs, regional organizations, national and local government officials, and civil society sectors. At the same time, peacebuilding is by definition intersectoral. Together with a (proposed but rejected in 2012) UN Council on Sustainability, these inter-governmental bodies could provide a means to confront the newer, more complex recognized fundamental drivers roots of conflict in today's world.

In general, the ability to recognize and subsequently mount a rapid response to these intersectoral, complex drivers of conflict can become a potent early warning system, which in turn brings the peacebuilding approach to the whole arc from prevention through conflict to recovery and reconstruction.

It also presumes unification and integration of the three pillars of the UN system: peace and security, human rights and development. Peacebuilding from prevention to recovery needs all three legs of the tripod, in mutual support of one another, and this the UN has never been able to deliver. Lately the necessary balance between the three pillars, and the price exacted by the existing imbalance in the multilateral system, is articulated more often by the UN Secretariat, Member States and groups of Member States.

## Emergency Platform

The Emergency Platform for complex shocks proposed in the Secretary-General's Policy Brief arising from Our Common Future is modeled in some respects on the Peacebuilding Commission's convening and integrative role. The Platform is a mechanism to create a nimble and broad-ranging response capability in a multilateral system normally stymied by entrenched and specialized interests within both intergovernmental and agency silos. It is not itself an agency, but a set of protocols which would be activated once a "complex global shock" is identified. As described by the Secretary-General:

The platform would not be a new permanent or standing body or institution. It would be triggered automatically in crises of sufficient scale and magnitude, regardless of the type or nature of the crisis involved. Once activated, it would bring together leaders from Member States, the United Nations system, key country groupings, international financial institutions, regional bodies, civil society, the private sector, subject-specific industries or research bodies and other experts.

"A complex global shock can be broadly understood as an event with severely disruptive consequences for a significant proportion of the global population that leads to secondary impacts across multiple sectors," he

said, and pointed out that, while by definition global complex shocks will arise with little or no warning, they are becoming more likely in our globalized, unstable environment.

The [Emergency Platform](#) is intended to create political leadership and response capability that is multi-sectoral (as is required by a complex emergency). It also features a strong emphasis on accountability to the global community:

“Any response mechanism must ensure that participating actors make clear commitments that directly and immediately support the global response to a complex shock. This may, for example, include a commitment of financial or technical resources, a commitment to advocate with key actors and/or a commitment to a significant policy shift that would have a meaningful impact on the response. Participants would need to accept accountability for delivering on these commitments.”

The Emergency Platform distinguishes itself with its clear expectation of required action, rather than producing an international agreement on action to be implemented nationally. The outcome, ideally, is a coherent and effective response, where one sector of the international system does not contradict and counteract the efforts of another, for example when intellectual property rights interfere with efforts to bring vaccines to the global system. It ensures that all parts of the multilateral system are responsible for contributing to the response in a coherent, coordinated fashion, each according to its mandate and capability, remaining accountable to its governing body, but contributing to a single, rapid and effective response.

The Peacebuilding Model, from which the Emergency Platform draws in concept, brings different mandates to bear on a single, complex situation. The Peacebuilding Commission represents the value of collective attention of the international system focused on to intractable, complex set of risk factors and damage in a given human community.

The Peacebuilding Commission’s ongoing work, tying “peace and security” together with other areas of UN responsibility, ideally paves the way for all these agencies and specialties, now more familiar with one another, to come together in a coordinated fashion under the Emergency Platform to urgently and effectively intervene when a complex shock requires an “all hands-on deck” response.

## Global Governance conceived differently

While Government statements in recent sessions have shown determination and vitality in the General Assembly's IGN and elsewhere, Security Council reform within the confines of current power mechanisms on its own might do little to budge the current trajectory towards diminution, even irrelevance, of the multilateral system unless accompanied by other changes in mentality, mandates, institutions and practice across the wider multilateral system.

The striking evidence of failure in the face of multiple global, interconnected and rapidly evolving threats has not only led to greater momentum for Security Council reform and strengthening the role of the General Assembly in relation to it. Recognition of the danger of the incapacity of multilateralism is building broader momentum and urgency to counteract "business as usual" with the "radical shift in our approach to global governance" called for by the HLAB. This shift centres on re-orientation of the culture of the international community in its entirety from a transactional foreign relations model to a principles- and norms-based model.

The most important contribution of the veto initiative is the fact that states can be both small and significant, empowered and empowering. Small states are the 'true guardians' of the international order and a corrective to a still impactful 'might makes right' mentality. ...We are here to restore legitimacy to the institutions which we know we need and which are being undermined, day after day, by one or more of their erstwhile guarantors. ...Unlocking the courage and wisdom of small states is key to preserving the credibility of an organisation that continues to groan under the weight of threats from large states using UN mechanisms in part as a back-handed way to achieve narrow national interests, including those at odds with the values and principles of the UN Charter.

Costa Rica, UNGA Debate, 26 April, Item 60

Part of this shift is exemplified by initiatives to actively seek the involvement of young people, as well as incorporating conscious responsibility for future generations into all deliberations, decisions, actions and commitments of effort and resources. This militates against the relentless drive towards short-term gain, national self-interest diplomacy, and the undue influence of both public and private powers who now dominate priorities at so many levels. It heralds the necessary shift in mentality towards the collective common good operationalized by a vibrant public sector.

It also poses the question: What is the role and purpose of multilateralism now and in the future? Stability or Equity? The usual decision-making

mechanisms and structures are only barely capable of maintaining stability, without even marginal shifts towards equity. It is becoming clear that “stability” of powers is not capable of shifting the trajectory towards equity. On the contrary, it is allowing inequity to threaten stability, at a cost of enormous human suffering.

The current strategy to restrict and re-conceive the use of the veto through initiatives requiring its justification to the full General Assembly membership in terms of the principles of the Charter, or constraint on the use of the veto in instances of mass atrocity, crimes against humanity or war crimes, therefore becomes a much more significant test of whether irrelevance of the multilateral system can be averted.

### **Box 2. Sense of Urgency From the UN**

We are at an inflection point in history. In our biggest shared test since the Second World War, humanity faces a stark and urgent choice: a breakdown or a breakthrough. ... In preparing the report, we have engaged with a broad array of stakeholders, including Member States, thought leaders, young people, civil society and the United Nations system and its many partners. One message rang through loud and clear: the choices we make, or fail to make, today could result in further breakdown, or a breakthrough to a greener, better, safer future. The choice is ours to make; but we will not have this chance again.”

*Our Common Agenda, A/75/982, August 2021*

## **Breakdown or Breakthrough?**

While it is an ultimatum, it is not a binary. Both breakdown and breakthrough are a spectrum. The points on the spectrum of each that we will arrive at in the coming years are not yet determined but some features of them can be foreseen, while others will evolve unpredictably.

“On our current trajectory, we face a collective breakdown. We are failing to address the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution,” says the report of the High-Level Advisory Board. This manifest failure is not limited to current levels of breakdown: future breakdown is already deeply baked in for our common future. The methane and CO<sub>2</sub> are already in the atmosphere, microplastics already ubiquitous in oceans and soils even as plastic waste generation has not slowed, the acceleration of species extinction, climate-change driven extreme weather events and destabilising changes in weather conditions, with all their knock-on effects on the delicately-balanced web of planetary life, is accelerating, persistent toxic

chemicals are already polluting large parts of the limited fresh water that life depends on – these and many other factors are already driving intensified breakdown deep into our future.

Breakdown is not new to the human condition. The gross inequity in how the cost of breakdown has been, and continues to be, distributed among and within most nations has brought international multilateralism to the brink of failure.

What is new is the scale and reach of breakdown. Breakdown has become a pervasive threat, interrelated, cross-sectoral and existential. It is geographically, socially and ecologically intertwined. Any countervailing breakthrough cannot take place in isolation. Without commensurate seamless congruence of breakthrough action across all areas of breakdown of human, animal and planetary life, addressing “everything, everywhere, all at once,” as the Secretary-General said in introducing the 2023 IPCC report, the inexorable forces of breakdown will eventually engulf us all.

Reform of the Security Council is an integral and for some integrated part of rebuilding trust and re-shaping multilateralism for today’s and tomorrow’s challenges.

Global Governance ... must evolve into a less hierarchical, more networked system where decision-making is distributed, where the efforts of a large number of different actors are harnessed, and where the collective mission is driven by delivery for people and planet. Ultimately, the multilateral system will be judged by its results: were we able to achieve a breakthrough that put the SDGs back on track, shifted our trajectory away from planetary destruction, and helped to manage the many global risks that threaten us all?

We are living in a moment when there is great cause for pessimism. It is easy to become disheartened by seeing our world being destroyed by our endless need for economic growth, a world where inequalities are accepted as the natural outcome of a competitive system. We have seen decades of broken promises by political leaders, and may think that nothing will change. It may not: If we continue on our current path, the 100-year anniversary of the United Nations in 2045 might be more of a funeral for multilateralism than a celebration of its success. But just as global leaders came together after the Second World War to envision a different world brought together by the UN, leaders at the Summit of the Future must demonstrate the political and moral courage to reimagine global governance and set us on a new path. Future generations will judge us by the decisions we take today.”

HLAB □

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