

A representative United Nations Security Council: is Input Legitimacy Sufficient?

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Abstract: This article aims to complement an existing body of literature on the lack of legitimacy in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It firstly builds a strong theoretical foundation that supports current reform proposals focused on enhancing participation in the Council. Using the African Union's (AU) proposition as a case study, the 'representative approach' is then evaluated as a legitimisation strategy for the UNSC. Both the effectiveness and the viability of the AU's proposal are assessed through cross-comparisons with competing coalitions and critical analysis grounded on a rich body of literature on legitimisation. The main conclusion is that, whilst, in theory, proposals like the AU's would be effective to legitimise the inputs of the Council, they are unlikely to succeed and are therefore not feasible strategies. This finding reveals that the legitimacy of the UNSC may be constrained by its founding social contract and suggests that legitimisation strategies may have to shift beyond structural approaches to reform. To that end, this article ends by foregrounding the procedural approach as a viable and possibly effective way of legitimising the Council, thereby opening a window of opportunity in the discussion of UNSC reform.

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the largest international peacekeeping organisation, occupying a central role in discussions of global security. Large n-studies across a range of contexts continuously show that, since its foundation in 1945, the Council has reduced civilian and military deaths (Carnegie & Mikulaschek, 2020, 825), prevented the spread of violence (Beardsley, 2011, 1060), facilitated peace processes (Kathman & Benson, 2019, 1622-1623) and helped to maintain post-conflict peace (Sambanis, 2008, 30). Moreover, case-study research also highlights the Council's unique role and ability to orchestrate international responses to global security threats, such as those seen in the Korean War (1950-1953) and the first Gulf War (1990-1991), and use its diplomatic leverage to de-escalate violence, such as its work in Apartheid South Africa (1977), Mozambique (1992), and Namibia (1989) (Fassbender, 2011, 42).

Partially due to its centrality and authority in the international system, the Council has always been subject to public scrutiny. Yet, the 21st century is marking an era of unprecedented criticism of the UNSC, both from policymakers and academics. Considering its performance in the last twenty-five years, this criticism may be warranted. Geopolitical rivalries, leading to legislative deadlocks, have rendered the Council unable to take decisive action in some of the most significant humanitarian disasters, such as those in Syria, Sudan, Myanmar, and Libya (Rashkow, 2022, 431). These conflicts alone have led to a cumulative death toll of around 900,000, with over 17 million displaced (Echochu, 2024, 1707-8). Moreover, the Council's inability to control great powers has seen unauthorised and

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² ChatGPT (version GPT-5.5, OpenAI) was used solely to check typographical errors. No AI-generated content was directly incorporated into the manuscript.

illegal wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Crimea, as well as failures to address the ongoing disasters in Ukraine and Palestine.

Beyond its outputs, the decision-making structure of the UNSC is also increasingly scrutinised, with many arguing that the last expansion of the Council in 1963 (which increased non-permanent members from 6 to 10) does not sufficiently reflect current power distributions on the world stage or represent the members of the UN. The status of the P5, and their contentious veto privileges, is also questioned and criticised as an outdated power that contradicts the equality of states doctrine of the UN Charter and often causes unacceptable legislative deadlocks (Patrick, 2023, 2). As a result, a rising number of coalitions, formed in the 21st century, campaign for structural reforms to increase representation. The main ones being the G4, the AU, Uniting for Consensus (UFC), the L.69 Group, and, most recently, the French Position.

Most concerningly, students of International Organisations (IOs) argue that growing dissatisfaction and reform coalitions serve as empirical evidence of a legitimacy crisis at the UNSC. Legitimacy, defined as the belief that an institution's authority is appropriately exercised, is particularly important for IOs (Tallberg & Zurn, 2019, 586). Because they cannot rely on coercive methods in the same way national and sub-national institutions can, legitimacy is their primary means of attaining compliance with the rules and norms IOs attempt to establish. Thus, the Council's legitimacy problem is often cited as existential. If the Council is to remain a relevant authority figure in international security, it must adequately address its legitimacy problem and seek methods of legitimation.

In order to better understand the root of the legitimacy problem at the Council, this article focuses on its most often cited and scrutinised aspect, its lack of representation. It asks the questions, are existing reform proposals, focused on enhancing representation, viable and effective legitimation strategies? And what do they tell us about the nature and future of the UNSC's legitimacy crisis?

The first section of this article will engage with a large body of literature on IOs, providing a constructivist theoretical framework through which the concept of legitimacy and UNSC reform can be understood. Then, the analysis section takes a case-study approach to the African Union's (AU) reform proposal, employing process-tracing and textual analysis methods to assess its effectiveness and viability. This section concludes that while, in theory, the AU's proposal could be an effective legitimation strategy, it is not politically viable and unlikely to succeed. However, its rejection provides great insights on the nature of the UNSC's legitimacy problem; the UNSC is constrained by its founding social contract and legitimation strategies may therefore have to shift beyond structural approaches to reform. To this end, the final section introduces the procedural approach to reform, using the case study of Resolution 76/262 to justify its potential as a viable and possibly effective legitimation strategy.

Literature Review

This article is based on two fundamental assertions: governing bodies cannot effectively operate without legitimacy, and representation can be a key variable to explain an institution's legitimacy, or

lack thereof. To support these claims, this section firstly conceptualises the concept of legitimacy in order to understand its dynamics in relation to IOs. It then foregrounds the relationship between representation and legitimacy, applying it specifically to the case of the UNSC. Finally, having supported these assertions, a framework for legitimization of the UNSC is constructed, which identifies the AU's reform proposal as the most compatible.

On Legitimacy and IOs

IOs tend to operate within a normative model of legitimacy, which refers to whether their process and outcomes are perceived as normatively desirable by the international community (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 156-157). For example, the World Bank seeks to eradicate poverty, the UNSC attempts to maintain peace, and the UN Human Rights Council (UNHRC) advocates for the protection of the most vulnerable individuals. These goals are deemed to be morally desirable, and thus, authority is granted to these institutions to achieve their mandates.

The other genre of legitimacy, social legitimacy, is distinct, but interrelated with normative legitimacy. It refers to the general acceptance from the people that an institution holds authority (Weiler, 2012, 826-827). For example, Nazi Germany did not hold normative legitimacy, but it enjoyed a great degree of social legitimacy. Thus, the distinction falls between idealism and realism (Weiler, 2012, 827). An institution should hold authority because it has morally desired aims (normative legitimacy), or an institution does hold authority because it has convinced or coerced people to accept so (social legitimacy).

IOs cannot, in general, coerce sovereign nation states into accepting their authority in the same way national governments can coerce their population, so they predominantly operate within a normative model of legitimacy. For those seeking legitimization, this is a significant finding, as it suggests that the UNSC should not concern itself with direct methods of social legitimization which may be ineffective and contradict its normative foundations (Weiler, 2012, 827). Thus, the UNSC should predominantly focus on whether its processes, outcomes, and mandates remain within a morally accepted framework in the international community. Beyond the normative-social distinction, legitimacy can be further analysed into a typology.

Output legitimacy is the extent in which an institutions' policies achieve its aims (Boedeltje & Cornips, 2004, 6). For the UNSC, this is whether it can consistently avoid conflicts between and within states. Input legitimacy is based on how equitable the institutions' decision-making processes are perceived to be (Boedeltje & Cornips, 2004, 4). Due to its technocratic decision-making, input legitimacy is limited in the UNSC and increasingly contested. The third type of legitimacy, throughput legitimacy, is the more nuanced of the three. It refers to how efficient, accountable, and transparent the institution's processes are deemed to be (Schmidt, 2013, 2). Whilst this is a concept that is largely dismissed within the UNSC, other IOs, like the European Union (EU), have been scrutinised over their inefficient processes (Schmidt, 2013,18).

This article, which focuses on whether enhancing representation is a sufficient legitimisation strategy for the UNSC, therefore targets input and throughput legitimacy. In the UNSC, input legitimisation strategies require Charter reform to increase the number of decision makers and can therefore be referred to as structural approaches to reform. In contrast, throughput legitimisation strategies do not always require Charter reform, as they may amend and modernise processes which fall beyond its scope. Thus, these strategies may be referred to as procedural, or non-amendment, approaches.

Legitimacy and Representation

There are several theoretical arguments that foreground the significance of representation to the perceived legitimacy of IOs, including the UNSC. This section reviews the three most significant ones: the argument of consent, the argument of equity, and the argument of perceptions. These serve to foreground the theoretical significance of representation as a major explanatory variable of IOs' legitimacy, or lack thereof.

In their design, IOs are formed by consenting member states which decide to enter cooperative organisations in hopes of achieving mutually desirable outcomes (Doyle, 1986, 1167). The idea of consent in international governance dates back to thinkers like Immanuel Kant, who argued that “politics and morality can only be in agreement within a federal union” made up of republican states (Kant, 1970, 129). Jean-Jacques Rousseau's

'Social Contract Theory' (Rousseau, 1997, 50) and John Locke's *'Theory of Private Property'* (Locke, 2014, 116), advanced the idea of consent, explicitly stating that a government's legitimacy is subject to whether it enjoys consent from those it aims to rule over.

The rise in reform coalitions and increasing dissatisfaction with the UNSC may therefore be reflective of the UN Member States no longer consenting to its social contract, which was initially agreed upon at the San Francisco Conference of 1945 (Ikenberry, 2019, 77-78).

Thus, a breakdown of the social contract signifies and explains the legitimacy deficit of the UNSC. In terms of legitimisation, increasing representation may be a critical way of achieving “greater unanimity of principle” and restoring the UN's social contract (Kant, 1903, 156). This perspective therefore highlights structural changes, aiming for input legitimisation, as effective avenues for regaining consent by modernising the Charter, and thus legitimising the council (Ikenberry, 2019, 78). Procedural reforms may also be appropriate legitimisation strategies but, because they do not tend to focus on the structure of the institution, they are unlikely to have the same effects on restoring the social contract relative to input strategies.

The second argument states that, in the 21st century, liberal IOs are becoming increasingly illegitimate because they continue to be perceived as lacking in equity. Critical scholarship analyses the IOs that co-constitute the liberal international order as institutions that reflect and further the interests of hegemonic states (Wallerstein, 2016, 23-24). Evidence for this argument is found both in their

asymmetric design and their uneven performance, which tend to systematically over-benefit those that designed them. For example, research into International Financial Institutions (IFIs) has shown how powerful states consciously curated funding rules and voting processes in order to create IFIs that would overrepresent their interests (Erin & Serdaru, 2020, 687). The UNSC, while presenting itself as a fair arbiter of international law, has also been subject to this asymmetric design process. For example, the very creation of the P5 has been demonstrated to lead to 'selective attention', a process whereby the Council's agenda systematically reflects the interests of the permanent members (Lundgren & Klamberg, 2023, 976-977). The UNSC's lack of representation is therefore a matter of equity and the increase in reform coalitions serve as empirical signals of how consequential this problem has become for UN Member States.

In terms of legitimation, the argument of equity goes beyond stating that participation should be increased, but that this must be done in a targeted way that benefits those members and regions which have historically been excluded (Mukherjee, 2023, 28-29). For example, regions like South America, Africa, and The Middle East are unrepresented in the permanent membership and, considering a significant majority of the Council's work targets these regions, their meaningful participation in the decision-making process may be a necessary condition for legitimation (Yinanç. 2023, 55). This perspective therefore highlights coalitions such as the AU or the Arab League as particularly significant for legitimation. In terms of reform approach, structural changes may be more effective legitimation strategies than procedural ones, as they are more likely to adequately address inequitable representation by enhancing the size of the UNSC or changing asymmetric powers that are entrenched in the Charter. The third argument, the argument of perception, falls within constructivist ontology and analyses how IOs can legitimise and delegitimise themselves through their unique ability to create international norms (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 16). The very development of the UNSC exemplifies this argument. In its creation, the UNSC enjoyed normative legitimacy by establishing the idea that as a new institution, which had learned from the failures of its forebearers, it could mitigate global anarchy to prevent the Great Wars that had dominated the first half of the 20th century. The Council's mission expanded in the 90s, adopting a broader definition of security and a new focus on interstate violence. Its efforts, overseeing democratic transitions in Namibia (1990) and Cambodia (1993) showed some signs of success, signalling that the Council was apt for this expansion. As a result, this created international perceptions that its enhanced authority was legitimate (Hurd, 2019, 718).

This process is referred to as substantive legitimation, where IOs can increase their normatively accepted goals in order to legitimise an increase of authority. However, substantive legitimation is fragile and contingent on the IO showing signs that their new mission is being attained and, most significantly, that these signs are perceived by those actors with the power to legitimise and delegitimise the institution (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 166).

Regardless of the operational successes of the Council, this approach highlights that the public perception of its structure and performance has been increasingly negative, which is leading to delegitimation (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 15). As these perceptions continue, Member States may revoke all legitimacy from the institution, and exist or disengage from it, or revoke some legitimacy and suggest reforms. This process explains both the rise in reform coalitions as well as recent events which have seen key member states slash their funding to the UN system and dismiss the role of the

Council in international security. Overall, the legitimacy crisis can be summarised from this approach using Walter et al.'s words: a “serious public relations problem” (2021, 1705).

In terms of reform strategy, the argument of perception calls upon both structural and procedural approaches. Enhancing representation by changing the structure of the UNSC could likely lead to an increased sentiment that Member States can meaningfully participate, thus legitimising the Council's inputs. Secondly, modernising the procedures by increasing transparency, accountability and efficiency mechanisms may serve to improve perceptions, and thus legitimise the Council's throughputs (Weiss & Hathaway, 2024, 4-5). Thus, this perspective highlights that the most effective legitimisation strategies are those which will change perceptions, thereby targeting the UNSC's ‘PR’ problem.

Applying the legitimisation framework: the AU

The arguments reviewed all reinforce, to different extents and through different means, that a lack of representation is a fundamental source of the legitimacy crisis. Expanding it should theoretically serve to legitimise the Council to some degree. However, it is still unclear who should benefit from reform. Against the backdrop of the reviewed literature, it would make little sense to expand representation to regions which already have significant presence in the P5. For example, a hypothetical inclusion of Germany or Canada would have little effect in changing the perceptions of those that see the Council as lacking in equity and overrepresenting the West. It is also unclear how far representative reform should go for them to be effective. If the UNSC were to increase a non-permanent seat, even if it were to be dedicated to an unrepresented region, the change may be perceived as too shallow and therefore fail to address fundamental inequities that rise from privileges like the veto. Thus, ideally, representative reforms should focus on areas which have traditionally been underrepresented in the Council, and they should seek to include these members meaningfully, which practically necessitates structural changes (Mbara et al., 2021 62).

Out of the current reform coalitions, the one that best meets these criteria is the AU, as it offers a meaningful proposal to address the problem of underrepresentation. Thus, while other coalitions are addressed, the AU's proposal serves as the case study to assess whether enhancing representation is a viable and effective legitimisation strategy. Beyond meeting the criteria, the AU also enjoys distinct qualities which make it more likely to be both viable and effective relative to other existing coalitions. Firstly, the AU is the largest coalition, composed of all 54 African states. This means that it already accounts for 42% of the votes required to pass Charter reform. Secondly, its position regarding UNSC reform is the clearest, as outlined by the 2005 Ezulwini Consensus. The AU demands an expansion of five non-permanent and two permanent seats, including veto powers (African Union, 2005, 9). This position has been ratified twice, in the C-10 and the Sirte Declaration (Mbete, 2023, 11). Thus, unlike other coalitions, the AU's proposal is clearly detailed and consistent, which strengthens its viability. In terms of its effectiveness, the AU's proposal is firmly aligned with the theoretical framework. Firstly, when the UNSC was founded African countries were either colonies or relatively weak on the world stage (African Union, 2005, 9). However, this is no longer the case. With all of Africa now decolonised, and many African states growing at some of the fastest rates globally, scholars argue that the 21st century will be marked by Africa's development (Mbara et al., 2021, 59). Thus, representing

Africa in the permanent membership of the Council would serve to acknowledge these fundamental changes in the world stage, which may help to revive the social contract between the UN and its Member States. Secondly, much of the insecurity in the world, and the work of the UNSC, is based in Africa. In 2018, over 70% of resolutions specifically concerned African peace and security (Mbara et al., 2021, 59). Therefore, African representation is also a matter of equity, as they should be able to contribute to decisions that will directly affect them. These factors make the AU's proposal a theoretically effective strategy for representative reform and legitimisation.

Analysis

This section directly answers the first research question; are current reform proposals, focused on enhancing representation, sufficient avenues to legitimise the UNSC? After a brief history of reform within the UNSC, this section assesses the potential effectiveness of the AU's demands through critical comparison with rivaling proposals based on the established theoretical framework. Then, its viability is assessed through a textual analysis of reform meetings, which reveal the political dynamics and complexities involved in reforming the UNSC. This section concludes that while the AU's proposal is the most effective to meaningfully enhance representation, it is not viable, making it an insufficient solution to legitimise the UNSC. However, in respect to the second research question, its rejection is revealing of the paradox behind the legitimacy crisis and the invisibility of reform. This being that the very Charter which fuels the crisis stands in the way of structural reforms. These conclusions are critical for understanding the nature of the legitimacy crisis and demand that future research into UNSC reform investigates more viable approaches that sidestep the Charter.

History of UNSC Reform

In the 21st century, the GA has organised various committees and forums to discuss the issue of UNSC reform (Mbara et al., 2021, 56). Established in 2003, the Open-Ended Working Group (OEWG) was a forum where the issue of representation regarding the UNSC was discussed. Due to a lack of structure at the OEWG meetings, in 2008, the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGNs) were created (Hathaway et al., 2025, 7). These panels structured conversations around five key areas: membership expansion, veto powers, representation, UNSC working methods, and the role of the GA. Whilst the ING's have not reached any solutions on the issue of representation, they have provided researchers with an abundance of primary data.

Moreover, in 2004, the UN's High-Level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, established the criteria of desirable prerequisites for member states wishing to be included in an expanded Council (UN, 2004, 2). Whilst the criteria are not compulsory, it has been the clearest attempt made by the UN to provide guidelines for states that seek permanent seats in the UNSC. The Panel recommends that new members should be considered on the basis of, "who contribute most to the United Nations financially, militarily, and diplomatically", and those countries, "more representative of the broader membership, especially of the developing world" (UN, 2004, 14). These guidelines have formalised conversations, framing them around the UNSC's key issues and serving as a framework for reform groups to assess the viability and effectiveness of various proposals.

Issues with efficacy of representative reform

Various counter arguments highlight that increasing representation may not be an effective legitimisation strategy, as it could threaten the performance of the UNSC. Firstly, some argue that the permanent seats of the Council were decided on a meritocratic basis and that expanding the Council to represent various parts of the world may be a risky legitimisation strategy (Hoopes & Brinkley, 1997, 221). They argue that the structure of the Council is not arbitrary or unreasonable. The victorious Allied Forces earned their position as the P5. These five states remain amongst the strongest global actors, thus, their place is still justified as they have the means to enhance the institution's power.

In terms of the AU, some have claimed that no contemporary African state can boast of being a great power in IR (Hoopes & Brinkley, 1997, 221). They would therefore suggest that there is limited value in expanding permanent membership to developing countries, and that any expansion should be made with power-maximising principles. This argument extends beyond academia and has been voiced as a concern in the GA. Yamazaki Kazuyuki, Japan's representative to the UN, set out this argument in the 2024 IGNs. He stated that the effectiveness of the UNSC could be harmed if countries that did not "significantly [contribute] to international peace and security" were to be represented (Kazuyuki, 2024, 1). This took direct issue with the effectiveness of the AU's proposal. Enhancing representation should not come before the Council's goal of keeping security which, some argue, is best done by great powers.

Secondly, some highlight the dangers of radically increasing representation as a legitimisation strategy. It has been argued that the UNSC was never designed to be a representative forum, but one that would complete its mandate of keeping security (Hoopes & Brinkley, 1997, 221).

Drastic reforms should therefore be met with caution. Once the 'floodgate' of reform is open, it will be hard to close, and this may damage the effectiveness of the Council. This argument is referred to as the '*effectiveness-legitimacy dilemma*', emphasising that, by seeking to enhance input legitimacy, the efficiency and effectiveness of an institution may be hindered (Buchanan & Keohane, 2011, 436). Therefore, some fear that radical attempts to increase the input legitimacy of the UNSC may have a negative effect on its outputs, as many of the Council's successes were due to expedient decision-making (Hoopes & Brinkley, 1997, 221). Thus, they conclude that representative reforms should be met with scrutiny and caution. This argument has been echoed in UN meetings, with Germany's representative arguing in the 2023 IGNs that reforms "should not come at the cost of effectiveness and efficiency" (Leendertse, 2023, 3). For the AU, this counterargument is particularly problematic. Because they have the strictest demands for representative reforms, they are faced with the effectiveness-legitimacy dilemma the most.

However, an important distinction to make is that these two arguments do not challenge the nature of representative reforms, but the degree and ways in which they should be implemented. Thus, before investigating how representative reforms should be effectively applied, an important aspect of the discussion is establishing the best proposal to increase input legitimacy. Methodologically, asserting

the most effective strategy to increase input legitimacy should come first. Once this is established, separate studies should address matters of application.

Increasing input legitimacy goes beyond simply increasing the size of the Council (Mukherjee, 2023, 28-29). The unequal power dynamics in the Council also have to be addressed to ensure fair participation. Without enhancing representation meaningfully, input legitimacy will not significantly increase (Buchanan & Keohane, 2011, 407). Current reform proposals, like the UFC's, face this issue by only advocating for an enlargement of 10 non-permanent seats. Although the UFC demands one of the largest membership expansions, this would not be an effective route to increase input legitimacy. This is because, solely focusing on non-permanent membership would make increases in representation less meaningful (Chen et al., 2022, 3-5). Aside from the veto, the P5 hold agenda-setting powers, control over draft resolutions, added influence in budgetary decisions and peacekeeping operations, and enjoy chairmanship of key subsidiary bodies (Gifkins, 2021, 7-9). Therefore, adding new non-permanent seats would only 'scratch the surface' of the problem, which is the asymmetric power that the P5 holds. Thus, by completely dismissing this critical factor, the UFC's proposal would not significantly enhance the input legitimacy of the UNSC.

The same argument extends to proposals that do not demand veto privileges. For example, while the G4 demand an expansion of 6 semi-permanent and 5 non-permanent seats, they do not call for veto powers. They attempt to create a 'middle class' in the Council that enjoys some of the privileges of the P5 (Mbara et al., 2021, 62). However, this approach is limited as a strategy to increase input legitimacy. The issue of the veto is perceived by the international community as a matter of "common justice" (African Union, 2005, 9-10). The UN Charter outlines that all of its members are equal, and the issue of the veto directly contradicts this. Thus, this is a core reason underpinning the legitimacy crisis, which is disregarded in the G4's strategy (Mbete, 2023, 11). This was argued by Sierra Leone's representative who stated that "meaningful participation" can only be guaranteed if new members have "equal decision-making powers including the veto" (Turay, 2023, 7). Thus, the G4's proposal would also be an ineffective avenue to increase input legitimacy.

This leads to the AU's proposal. Whilst the AU demand for a smaller expansion of the Council compared to the UFC and G4, it is a far more effective proposal for input legitimization (Gelot & Söderbaum, 2024, 823). This is simply because they address the fundamental cause of the input legitimacy crisis: the asymmetric dispersion of power established by the veto and other privileges of the P5. Thus, amongst current reform proposals, the AU's would be an effective route to increase input legitimacy in the UNSC.

Issues with viability

Having established that the AU's representative approach would, in theory, effectively legitimise the inputs of the Council, this leads one to assess the viability of their proposals. Thus, in this subsection, three arguments are presented that highlight the practical complexities of representative reforms in reference to the AU: tensions within the AU, competing coalitions, and amending the UN Charter. Ultimately, reforming the Charter is identified as the biggest barrier to structural reform. Moreover, this issue is generalisable to all reform coalitions and, whilst it is predominantly analysed in relation

to the AU's proposal, it serves to directly answer the first part of the research question; are the leading reform proposals, focused on enhancing representation, sufficient to legitimise the Council?

Tensions within the AU

Firstly, fragmentations within the AU may be limiting the consistency and intensity of their advocacy (Mbara et al., 2021, 62). Even though the AU remains the most united group, the inaction surrounding reforms of the UNSC has caused some fragmentations. Shortly after the Ezulwini Consensus, the AU received criticism for its unrealistic demands. The situation was described by a German representative as the AU, “demanding more than it would appear that the UN members or the UN system is capable of giving” (Sudan Tribune, 2005, 3). Former Nigerian President, Olusegun Obasanjo, called on the AU to compromise in hopes of breaking the deadlocks in the GA. However, at the emergency AU summit in 2005, the proposal to drop calls for the veto failed, with 90% of the group voting against it (Mbara et al., 2021, 62). This situation caused tensions within the continent. For example, Egypt grew fearful, believing that Nigeria and South Africa would be prepared to take a diluted deal that excluded them (Mbara et al., 2021, 62).

Within the IGNs, this situation raised the question of which AU country would be granted permanent seats. The Ezulwini Consensus suggests that it would be up to the AU to decide. However, ongoing tensions in the AU have affected the clarity of their proposal, as they have not been able to state who would be part of a UNSC expansion (Mbara et al., 2021, 62). The top contenders for the two permanent seats are Egypt, South Africa, Kenya and Nigeria. However, in the hope of preserving the ‘common African position’, the AU has not named specific candidates. Inevitably, this has harmed the strength of their proposal in the discussion of reform. UN journalists have posed a difficult question to supporters of the AU: “well, which African Country?”, referring to the lack of clarity in the proposal and the underlying geopolitical tensions (Rachman, 2024, 7). Thus, fragmentations within the AU are affecting the clarity of their demands and the viability of their proposal.

Rivalling coalitions

Another key barrier to the AU's proposal is rivalling coalitions (Rashkow, 2022, 434). There is intense competition for who should benefit from possible UNSC expansion, with many groups offering very compelling arguments. Potentially, the AU's biggest challenger is the

G4, a group consisting of Brazil, India, Germany, and Japan. For some, the G4 may even have an edge over the AU because they dropped their demands for the veto, thus showing flexibility. This incremental approach to representative reform has been favoured by those UN members concerned with the consequences of drastically expanding the council (Rashkow, 2022, 435). Moreover, the inclusion of India and Brazil allows the G4 to argue that their proposal would include the Global South (Mbara et al., 2021, 65). Lastly, and most critically, the G4 covers the meritocratic criteria for reform. As of 2021, Japan contributed 12.5% of the UN's budget and Germany over 8%, which are the highest numbers after the US. Not only is this in line with those that argue that UNSC's expansion should be based on merits, but it also coincides with the criteria set out by the UN (Cox, 2005, 115-116).

Therefore, the G4 coalition is seen by some as the ideal median that overshadows the AU's position (Rashkow, 2022, 435).

The G4's approach has served as a model for other coalitions to follow, such as the UFC Group (Cox, 2005, 115). Formed by Italy, Spain, South Korea, Argentina, Mexico, Turkey, and Canada, their approach to reform offers even more flexibility. The UFC Group requests that the Council only expand non-permanent seats. They argue that any addition of permanent seats could cause further deadlocks in the Council. In response to the AU's demands, Italy's Representative argued on behalf of the UFC that enhancing permanent seats would make it, "rather difficult, to say the least, for the elected members to contribute effectively to the work of the council, or even have their weight felt" (Massari, 2023, 3). Thus, this has served to echo the effectiveness-legitimacy dilemma, thereby harming the viability of the AU's proposal. While the AU has been able to maintain itself at the forefront of the race for reform, these dynamics with rivaling coalitions have undoubtedly stalled its mission within the IGN and GA sessions (Cox, 2005, 115-116). Ultimately, two decades of complex debates between coalitions have fundamentally served to delay tangible action.

Changing the UN Charter

Enhancing the size of the Council, or changing the nature of the veto, requires amendments to the UN Charter, which has only happened once in 1963 (Hathaway et al., 2025, 7). The difficulty is primarily due to the high standard required by the UN Charter to make amendments. As stated in Article 108, to even convene a meeting in the GA for a review of the Charter, a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority vote is required (UN Charter, 1945, Article 108, para. 1). This has never happened in the history of the UN. Then, as stated in Article 109, Charter reform relating to the UNSC requires a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority, with all of the P5 voting in favour (UN Charter, 1945, Article 109, para. 1). Whilst the AU already makes up 42% of votes required to pass Charter reform, acquiring the rest has proved a complex task due to the number of competing coalitions (Rashkow, 2022, 438). This is the biggest barrier to structural reform in the UNSC and, whilst this is analysed in relation to the AU's proposal, the technical and political complexities of changing the UN Charter are issues that can be generalised across all reform coalitions.

Article 9 requires all of the P5 to vote in favour of reform proposals. In terms of the feasibility of the AU's proposal, uniting the P5 under one proposal would be near impossible in the current geopolitical climate (Hathaway et al., 2025, 12-13). Events like Russia's invasion of Ukraine have divided the P5, making unanimous decisions unlikely. Within the Council, France, the UK, and the US have frequently condemned Russia's use of their veto power to prevent ceasefires (UN News, 2022, 3). The UK's representative argued in a 2023 IGN meeting that, "Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine just over a year ago has not only violated the key principles of the UN Charter, but has also disrupted the way the Council operates" (Woodward, 2023, 1). In reference to possible cooperation with Russia, the French representative noted, "the Russian Federation is alone" (Riviere, 2022, 9). From Russia's perspective, their frustration with the UN and Western powers has grown. Russia's representative argued that the institution's media outlets are at a new, "height of propaganda" and that the responsibility of the war in Ukraine, "lies at your feet", referring to Western members of the P5 (Nebenizia, 2022, 12). This situation has left the Council deadlocked, with the issue of reform taking a backseat (Anand, 2022, 1).

Therefore, against the backdrop of ongoing geopolitical tensions, structural reform proposals, including the AU's, are unlikely to enjoy unanimous support from the P5.

Tensions between the P5 have further increased in the Council since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, suggesting that the situation is unlikely to improve in the near future (Aylward et al., 2025, 4). For example, China's frustration with the US's support of Taiwan is growing, warning the US not to, "go further down the wrong and dangerous path" (Yi, 2022, 1). Repeated uses of the veto by the US on motions for a ceasefire in Palestine has further frustrated Russia. They point out a hypocrisy from the US, stating they refuse to listen to their "spurious excuses" in the Council (Nebenzia, 2024, 2). Considering the P5 ultimately holds the key that unlocks the door to structural reform, it is unlikely that they will reach agreements regarding UNSC reform in the near future.

Moreover, the issue of the veto has been politicised, making the AU's demands infeasible (Ade-Ibijola, 2020, 139). Although the P5 claims to support the AU, this remains superficial, as they are fundamentally against expanding the veto privilege (Winther, 2022, 3). For example, China has arguably been amongst the most vocal advocates for African representation. However, in reference to supporting the AU, the Chinese representative argued that expanding the veto was not in line with, "enhancing efficiency and optimising [the UNSC's] structure" (Jun, 2023, 3). This attitude is not limited to China. With the exception of France, the P5 are fundamentally against an expansion of the veto (Hathaway et al., 2025, 55). Thus, unanimous support for meaningful proposals, like the AU's, is improbable, as most of the P5 are hesitant to dilute their own veto powers.

Western members of the P5 have also politicised the conversation of African representation, making unanimous support for the AU unlikely (Ade-Ibijola, 2020, 139). China's growing relationship with Africa, through investments like the Belt and Road Initiative, have raised concerns in the West (Vines & Wallace, 2023, 4). Thus, some argue that the Western powers in the P5 would be hesitant to include a potential ally of China as a permanent member of the Council (Fung and Lam, 8-9). These examples show the complex political dynamics between the P5 when it comes to supporting reform proposals. Ultimately, the discussion of UNSC expansion has become politicised, and the P5 have used it as a forum to express geopolitical competition, which makes unanimous support of one proposal not viable.

Findings and contributions: the limitation of representative reform

Overall, the analysis of the AU's proposal does not provide optimism for the future of meaningful representative reforms. As argued, the AU's proposal is the only current one that would effectively improve input legitimacy in the Council. Rivalling coalitions like the G4 do have some merit, but, without demanding access to the veto, meaningful participation would be limited (Mbete, 2023, 11). Such proposals would therefore not see significant increases in input legitimacy. Thus, in a discussion of effective input legitimisation strategies, the AU's proposal should be credited as the strongest.

The lack of optimism comes from the infeasibility of the AU's proposal. The difficulty in changing the UN Charter, as outlined in Article 109, makes the viability of all structural reform proposals, including the AU's, very unlikely. Amongst the arguments assessed, the most critical ones are those analysing the current geopolitical tensions between the P5 (Hathaway et al., 2025, 12-13). Having

politicised the conversation of UNSC reform, it is very unlikely that the P5 will agree on one reform proposal. Therefore, while the AU's proposal would be an effective method of enhancing input legitimacy, it is realistically unattainable. In reference to the research question, current representative reform proposals are an insufficient avenue to legitimise the UNSC.

The significance of these findings extends beyond a rejection of the AU's proposal and the representative approach to reform. Their failure raises a broader question: what do they reveal about the nature of legitimacy in IOs such as the UNSC? This article has focused on testing whether enhancing representation can restore the social contract and modernise decision-making structures, which is often cited by IOs and legitimacy scholars to be critical for legitimisation (Ikenberry, 2019, 78). However, these scholarly perspectives often operate with a degree of theoretical idealism, paying insufficient attention to the institutional and political constraints to reforms within specific IOs. In the UN system these were found to be the UN charter, which requires the P5's consent to modernise itself. Due to geopolitical rivalries among the P5 and an existing incentive to block reforms, the political complexities in the UN system are found to be detrimental to ideal legitimisation strategies.

Thus, IOs with highly entrenched constitutions, such as the UN, suffer from these systematic and endogenous constraints to structural reforms. In terms of the legitimacy crisis, this means that the founding social contract of the UNSC is not only a source of the legitimacy deficit, but also the principal constraint to structural reforms and input legitimisation strategies like the AU's. This fundamental deadlock should therefore serve as signs to both academics and practitioners that alternative approaches to legitimising the UNSC warrant investigation.

Alternatives: The Procedural Approach

These findings do not aim to discredit the initiatives of coalitions like the AU but, they suggest that new strategies of legitimisation should be researched. As the former Chairman of the AU argued, “we need to act beyond the classical stand to move our project forward” (Faki, 2023, 2).

A constructivist-based approach to legitimacy provides numerous avenues for reforms by highlighting the significance of procedural approaches as viable legitimisation strategies (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 168). Particularly for short-term legitimisation, these types of reforms can be more easily attainable, as they may not require structural or constitutional amendments. As evidenced by Article 27(2) of the UN Charter, “decisions on the Security Council's procedural matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members” (UN Charter, 1945, Article 27, para. 2). This threshold is far more attainable than the one required for representative reforms. Moreover, because the procedural approach can improve the efficiency, transparency, and representativeness of institutions' processes, constructivists argue that it could be an effective legitimisation avenue (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004, 168). This section explores the merits of the procedural approach by reviewing the effects that recent reforms had on the throughput legitimisation of the UNSC. Then, the procedural approach is applied to an outdated process of the UN, thereby highlighting its feasibility and potential as a tool for legitimisation.

Resolution 76/262

Examples of procedural reforms in the UNSC show that this approach is a far more viable avenue to modernisation (UNA-UK, 2022, 3-4). In 2022, the GA passed Resolution 76/262 regarding the working methods of the Security Council. This resolution demands that after any use of the veto in the Council, a meeting within ten days will be convened in the GA to debate its purpose (UNGA, 2022, 1-2). The resolution was ‘passed by consensus’ during a formal meeting on the use of the veto. This meant that it was passed without a vote, due to an absence of any UN member state requesting a formal voting process or raising concerns about the proposal. Overall, this resolution was presented, debated, and passed in a matter of weeks (Olabuenaga, 2023, 285). Already, Resolution 76/262 shows that the procedural approach can be far more viable than the traditional representative approach.

The debates over Resolution 76/262 covered the central arguments that are stated in the Analysis section, such as the power asymmetries caused by the veto. As the Italian representative argued, it is an “outdated power” which violates the principle of equality of states (Massari, 2023, 9). This view was expanded by India’s delegate. He argued, “either all nations are treated equally in the context of voting rights or else the new permanent members must also be given the veto” (Mathur, 2023, 25). At first glance, Resolution 76/262 may not have addressed these concerns and the fundamental problems with the veto.

However, while not changing the nature of the veto, the resolution progressed in the right direction by providing an avenue for UN member states to participate and hold the P5 accountable. This has proven to be effective at increasing the throughput legitimacy of the UNSC. In theory, increasing accountability after the veto is used may discourage the P5 from abusing their power (Hathaway et al., 2025, 44). Whilst it is difficult to assess whether the veto is now used more cautiously since Resolution 76/262 was passed, what is certain is that there are more transparent conversations in the GA. This is significant as, because the GA is the most representative body in the UN, increasing its discursive role will enhance member states’ participation. Thus, because there are more means to participate and hold the P5 accountable, the perceived throughput legitimacy of the UNSC is increased (Hathaway et al., 2025, 48). This is evidenced by Oliver Maes, Luxemburg’s UN representative, who argued that the resolution marked a “crucial step” in increasing the “accountability and transparency” of the Council (Maes, 2022, 12). The representative of Liechtenstein reinforced this sentiment by stressing that Resolution 76/262 means that, “the veto is no longer the end of the conversation” (Wenaweser, 2024, 2). This shows that member states’ representatives are appreciative of the increased avenues for participation. Thus, Resolution 76/262 can be granted a degree of effectiveness as a throughput legitimisation strategy.

Resolution 76/262 has not changed the fundamental nature of the veto. However, it has delivered successes towards modernising the procedures of the UNSC by enhancing the accountability of the P5. Moreover, considering the decades of stagnation seen with the representative approach to reform, this resolution represents a pragmatic step towards modernisation which has increased throughput legitimacy. As argued by Romania's UN representative, the resolution “broke the ice on long-needed

reform discussions” (Feruță, 2023, 11). Thus, evidenced by Resolution 76/262, the procedural approach can deliver expedient action, which can enhance the throughput legitimacy of the UNSC.

Looking ahead: Uniting for Peace Resolution 377A (V)

The procedural approach opens a ‘window of opportunity’ to increase throughput legitimacy in the UNSC (Weiss & Hathaway, 2024, 4-5). Beyond creating new procedural amendments, as seen with Resolution 76/262, auditing existing ones is another viable way of increasing the efficiency and accountability of processes in the UN (Anich, 2023, 57). For example, the Uniting for Peace Resolution 377A (V) (UFP), passed in 1950, could be modernised to enhance the throughput legitimacy of the Council. The resolution grants the GA authority to consider matters of security if the Council is deadlocked or failing to fulfil its fundamental duties. Originally, UFP was passed due to the US’s interest in taking multilateral action during the Korean War (Anich, 2023, 45). Because China continually vetoed UNSC proposals, the US felt it necessary to form a resolution to break deadlocks. However, in the absence of a P5 member supporting the enactment of this resolution, its efficacy is currently limited and has only been implemented once in the 21st century (Anich, 2023, 44). This is because it requires a UN member to trigger it and, without the support of the P5, doing so could have politically problematic consequences (Scharf, 2023, 244). For example, in 2004, humanitarian disasters in Darfur, a Western province of Sudan, were largely ignored in the UNSC. China repeatedly blocked economic sanctions on Sudan, due to its vested interest in their oil industry (Olimat, 2014, 122). Due to China’s influence in the continent, African countries were sceptical of involving themselves in the conflict. Therefore, within the Council, the AU was fearful of the potential consequences of triggering the UFP Resolution (Fung & Lam, 2022, 23). This shows that, even though it takes one member to trigger the resolution, political influences from the P5 have made this difficult. Therefore, the UFP resolution could increase participation, accountability, and efficiency; however, its current working methods are limited due to the political influences that the P5 can exert.

By taking inspiration from Resolution 76/262, procedural amendments can be made to the UFP Resolution to modernise it (Hathaway et al., 2025, 50-52). For example, UFP could be triggered instantly when the P5 vetoes key security decisions. These decisions are defined under Chapter VII of the UN Charter as, the powers to act of the UNSC, including, imposing economic sanctions, mandating ceasefires, and authorising military interventions (UN, 1945, Article 41, para. 1). In such high-stakes uses of the veto, an emergency meeting in the GA could be automatically triggered to discuss whether the Council is failing to uphold its mandate and vote on whether UFP should be passed. This procedural amendment would sidestep the difficulties of requiring individual members to trigger the resolution (Hathaway et al., 2025, 50). Moreover, this change would not require Charter reform and could be passed readily in the GA like Resolution 76/262.

As a result, there would be two direct improvements to the UN’s processes which would help legitimise the UNSC. Firstly, it would improve the effectiveness of the UN system (Hathaway et al., 2025, 48). By highlighting possible deadlocks in the Council instantly, the GA can pass UFP, if deemed necessary, and fulfil its duties of maintaining security. This would have been critical during the Syrian revolution, in 2011, where the Council was deadlocked after more than 16 vetoes (Scharf, 2023, 237). Secondly, this amendment would improve the efficiency of the UN system. During the Six Day War

(1967) and the Gulf War (1990), UFP Resolution took weeks to be activated and passed. Thus, immediately triggering the resolution would save time, which was a critical factor in these two events (Allen & Yuen, 2024, 9-10). As a result, this change would enhance the throughput legitimacy of the UNSC. By increasing the role of the GA, and the speed in which it can act, there is an added layer of accountability for the P5 (Hathaway et al., 2025, 48). Moreover, whilst this may not directly address the concerns of reform groups like the AU, it would increase participation of UN members in security related matters (Hathaway et al., 2025, 48). As seen with Resolution 76/262, continuing conversations in the GA after a veto, has worked effectively to increase the perceived legitimacy of the UN.

Evaluation

It is important to highlight the limitations of the procedural approach, as it should not be the only tool to legitimise the UNSC. Firstly, it is unlikely to lead to significant structural changes, as these will often require Charter reform. So, amending the veto or enhancing the size of the Council will not be possible with the procedural approach. Thus, the procedural approach is a short-term tool which is useful for legitimising the Council but will not fix the fundamental problems (Hathaway et al., 2025, 66). Secondly, the procedural approach should be used with caution. Reforms like increasing the accountability of the P5 are important, however, this should not come at the expense of isolating them from the wider UN system (Quincy Institute, 2024, 10). Therefore, it is imperative that UN member states work alongside the P5 to ensure mutual consensus is reached, thereby avoiding fragmentations that could damage the efficacy of the UN. Currently, France and Mexico have been doing this, which is yielding promising conversations (Hathaway et al., 2025, 12). The French/Mexico Position openly questions the nature and necessity of the veto and discusses potential avenues for reform. This is the ideal context where this approach should be applied, as it will avoid severe disputes with P5 and be more successful when coupled with their support.

Overall, the procedural approach offers optimism in the conversation of UNSC reform. It has offered a viable way to reintroduce the GA, an institution that has been largely sidelined in issues of security. As seen with Resolution 76/262, this has enhanced throughput legitimacy in the Council, by increasing accountability and avenues for participation. Further areas of investigation should also focus on Article 27(3), which stipulates that members in the Council should abstain from voting if they are party to the conflict in question (Hathaway et al., 2025, 56). Evidenced by Russia and the US, this article has not been respected in the 21st century. The potentiality of the procedural approach may be vast and warrants further investigation.

Conclusions

Overall, current reform proposals, aimed at increasing representation, are insufficient to legitimise the UNSC. While approaches like the AU's may appear theoretically effective, their insufficiency for legitimising the Council comes from the fact that they are not feasible. Ultimately, there is a dilemma in this strategy: to make representative reforms sufficiently strong to increase input legitimacy, permanent seats with the veto are required. However, various institutional and political factors prevent this approach from succeeding. Institutionally, the UN Charter, as stated in Article 109, poses a high barrier for structural reform, demanding unanimity from the P5. Politically, the P5 are geopolitically

divided, reluctant to dilute their veto power, and sceptical of what an expanded Council would mean for their permanent status. This means unanimous support for initiatives like the AU's is unlikely. However, this rejection is revealing of the nature and dynamics of the UNSC's legitimacy; the UNSC is constrained by its founding social contract and legitimization strategies may therefore have to shift beyond structural approaches to reform.

In terms of the future of reform, the procedural approach is argued to be a possible lifeline for the Council's legitimacy crisis. As seen with Resolution 76/262, the approach proved to be both viable and expedient, even showing some signs that it could enhance throughput legitimacy. Having said this, further research should address the effectiveness of this approach as, at face value, it does not directly address the fundamental problems of the UNSC. The Charter is critically outdated and institutionally entrenched and, for the UN to remain a relevant actor in the area of international security, these issues will have to be addressed. Ultimately, IOs need to have a balance between establishing normative principles that are constitutionally protected and having a degree of flexibility to adapt to changing world orders. The UN, like many other IOs, is yet to find this 'golden mean'.

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