Pop-Up Case: UN Security Council Reform

The UN Security Council, created more than fifty years ago, has primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security. Some experts argue that the current structure of the UN Security Council, formed in the aftermath of World War II, does not reflect today's geopolitical reality. As a result, the legitimacy, effectiveness, and representativeness of the Security Council has been subjected to ongoing debate. The United States will need to decide where it stands on the issue of UN Security Council reform.

Use the following hypothetical case to spark discussion and help students to think through what they would do if they were decision makers. See the back of the page for some inspiration for how to structure your conversation.

The Situation:

The UN Security Council, which forms one of the six principal organs of the United Nations, is charged with ensuring global peace and security. Formed in 1945 in the wake of World War II, the body brought together the major world powers that shaped the geopolitical system at the time. It elevated five countries as "permanent" members—the United States, China, France, Russia, and the United Kingdom, with significant influence in determining international decisions. Other countries rotate as "nonpermanent" members.

When it was founded, the Security Council aimed to address the failing of the League of Nations to maintain world peace. With the goal of strengthening the organization based on the realities of economic and military influence, including its permanent members' nuclear capabilities, the council armed its five permanent member countries with a veto power for any "substantive" international resolution.

In his remarks to the UN Security Council in 2022, U.S. President Joe Biden said, "I also believe the time has come for this institution to become more inclusive so that it can better respond to the needs of today's world." Biden's statement reflects growing concerns that the institution is out of date.

Critics call for a reboot of the UN Security Council through structural reforms. To some, the UN Security Council reinforces existing inequities in the international system. For example, none of its permanent members represents low- or middle-income countries, and they do not reflect all world regions (noticeably absent, for instance, are any permanent members from Africa, Central and South America, or the Middle East). What's more, the Security Council is often paralyzed by division between blocs. Russia and China, for example, have used their veto power to stop several attempts by the council to enact resolutions in Syria and Ukraine. As it stands, the organization has had arguably limited success in thwarting or responding to wars and humanitarian crises, indicating that change may be necessary to enable more effective solutions.

Still others insist that reform is risky and that the status quo is simply the best option. If membership is changed or expanded, they ask, which three countries should be elevated as new permanent members, and according to what criteria? To those who oppose UN Security Council reform, no acceptable alternative exists—selecting any new permanent members would be too politically difficult, making consensus impossible. Further, adding more members could make the council more like the General Assembly, the United Nations' only universally representative body. That move could be more equitable but could also risk building another ineffective bureaucracy that is not nimble enough to make decisions and lacks credibility, ultimately shrinking its influence.

Decision Point:

The United States needs to consider its position on UN Security Council reform—whether it should stand at the forefront of reform and push for a new era, resist modification and recommend maintaining the current status quo, or try an altogether different approach.

NSC members should consider the following policy options:

- **Promote maintaining the current UN Security Council architecture.** Holding fast to the status quo could help the U.S. maintain its power and avoid risky alternatives. Doing so would risk failing to respond to growing criticism about the organization’s ability to play a meaningful role in peacekeeping—and if a reform movement were to take root, the U.S. may have less credibility to lead the design of alternatives.

- **Lead an agenda to reform the UN Security Council.** Leading a change initiative could give the United States an advantage, allowing the country to shape reform and possibly position itself in a favorable role. Any changes to the council, however, could also come with risks and would likely diminish U.S. power in the world.

- **Continue to communicate support for reform without taking substantive action.** Continuing to endorse the idea of reform would likely build support for U.S. leadership on the issue among nations that feel excluded. However, that approach could spark criticism of U.S. hypocrisy if words are not followed with action. Such criticism could damage U.S. influence abroad.

Additional Resources:

1. Reforming the UN Security Council: Increasing Equality in the International Arena (Georgetown Journal of International Affairs)
2. Why "Reforming" the UN Security Council is a Bad Idea (Council on Foreign Relations / Pressure Points)
3. The Long and Winding Road to Security Council Reform (Just Security)

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Pop-Up Case Guidelines

Pop-up cases from Model Diplomacy are short case studies on current events that put students in the shoes of policymakers facing the most pressing issues in international relations. There are lots of ways to organize a discussion using a pop-up case. It is always helpful to think about your goals for the discussion and then to consider any time or participation constraints you could have. If you are teaching online and cannot discuss synchronously, consider a short writing assignment or using an online discussion board (see some excellent tips here and here). If you are teaching face-to-face or over videoconference and are looking for some inspiration, here are a few ideas:

**Gauge Reaction:**

If you want to show what students are thinking before diving into the discussion, here are two easy ways to do it. In one, often called “four corners,” assign each policy option to a corner of the room, and then ask students to stand in the corner associated with the policy option they support. In the other, if you want your students to think along a spectrum instead (e.g., interventionist-isolationist, unilateral-multilateral, more urgent–less urgent), put the ends of your spectrum at either end of your blackboard and have students stand along the board to indicate where along the spectrum they fall. With both approaches, everyone will sit down again with a sense of where they stand regarding the case. Use this knowledge to shape discussion—eliciting less popular opinions, challenging more popular ones, encouraging like-minded students to further develop their ideas, or having students who disagree discuss in small groups.

**Think-Pair-Share:**

This exercise is particularly useful for groups where some students are hesitant. Ask everyone to spend a few minutes quietly gathering their thoughts and articulating them in a notebook (“think”), then have them turn to the person sitting next to them to compare notes (“pair”), and then have students report out to the whole group (“share”), knowing that everyone will have had time to think through something to say.

**Whiparound:**

Ask students to briefly share their position one after the other without responding to each other. Typically, everyone speaks in the order they are sitting. This can be a way to see where everyone stands before launching into a discussion. If you expect a topic to be particularly contentious, you could have students listen to each other and then reflect in writing.

**Simple Cabinet Simulation:**

Appoint yourself (or a student) to be president. Ask students to debate the policy options (or come up with new ones), and try to reach consensus on a recommendation to the president. The president should ask questions and ultimately make a decision and explain their choice.

**Cabinet Simulation With Assigned Opinions:**

While assigning individual roles for a brief case study is complicated, you could assign the class opinions. For example, divide your class into three groups, and assign each group one of the policy options presented in the case. Let the groups caucus for a few minutes, then present their policy options and debate them, leaving the final decision up to you (or another student) as president.

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