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TOWARDS MULTIPLE SECURITY COUNCILS

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This series, inspired by the Working Group on Global Governance Innovation and Renewal meeting held on 15 December 2019 at the Doha Forum, seeks to highlight authors writing on topics that stimulate debate and influence: (1) the UN 75 Political Declaration, (2) the 21 September 2020 UN 75 Leaders Summit in New York and its follow-through, and (3) follow-up activities such as a proposed 2023 UN Conference on Multipolar Governance and Global Institutions, as recommended in the 2019 Doha Forum Report.[1] Views expressed here do not necessarily reflect those of The Stimson Center, its Board of Directors, or any of the partners who supported this project.

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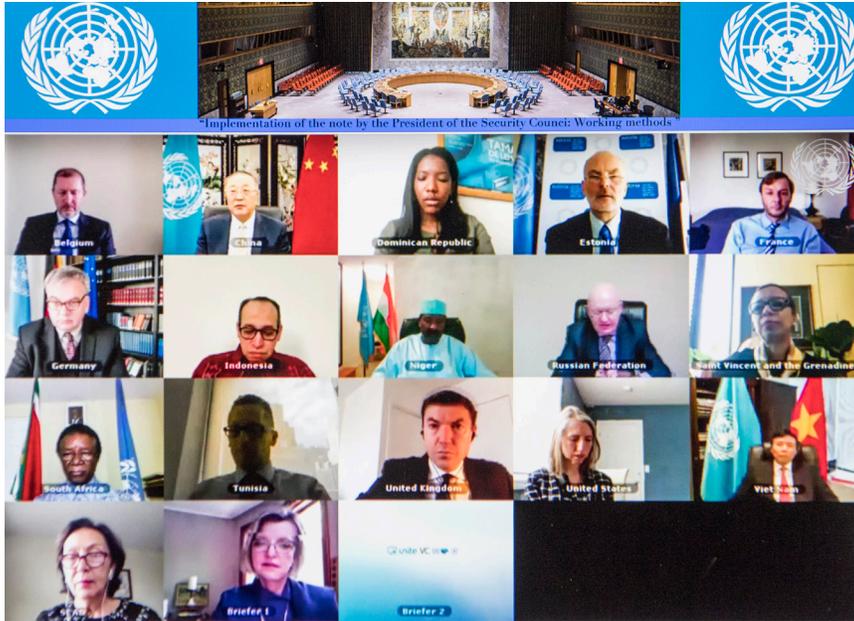
Security Council Members Hold Open Videoconference on Working Methods. May 2020.

Credit: UN Photo/ Eskinder Debebe

Abstract

The 75th anniversary of the United Nations is an apt moment to reflect on the current status and envisage potential bold reforms to the architecture of the UN system. While political barriers to change are hard to overcome, imagining transformations can spur discussion in helpful ways and identify areas where fresh attention is needed. This paper argues that the UN Security Council's ineffectiveness in addressing arising complex security challenges, such as conflict re-escalation, climate change and COVID-19, among others, can be solved by establishing three additional Councils: a Peacebuilding Council, a Climate Security Council, and a Health Security Council. Each would focus on a specific security-related agenda, operate openly, transparently, responsibly, and without veto. The current Security Council remains the primary organ focusing entirely on Chapter VII actions in response to threats to international peace and security. The three new Councils do not undermine all privileges of the current permanent members of the Security Council, but benefit from larger, more representative configurations of Member States, amplifying their voice for world peace, which in turn brings new ideas, expertise, funds, services, and capacities to strengthen international peace and security, and engages relevant UN agencies, other organizations, and actors to ensure well-informed decisions. This innovative model aims to contribute to the debates leading up to and following the UN75, to be taken up by governments committed to multilateralism, major regional organizations, and the UN Secretary-General in the coming years. An independent expert commission should be established to study and elaborate on this proposal further.

Rethinking UN reform

On the eve of the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations (UN), the COVID-19 pandemic has beset the world. According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, it is "the most challenging crisis we have faced since the Second World War."[2] Global crises have historically opened opportunities to learn lessons, revise attitudes, eliminate inefficiencies, innovate, and transform. The

COVID-19 has prompted the "Global Ceasefire" initiative of the Secretary-General[3] and could further galvanize efforts for reform, closing the gap between the organization we have and the future we want. It is time to prompt governments to rethink policies, accelerate implementation of innovations, and produce a zest to revamp the UN system. While political barriers to change are hard to overcome, imagining transformations can spur discussion in helpful ways and identify areas where fresh attention is needed.

This paper proposes to circumvent the gridlocked process of the UN Security Council reform and create an independent expert group to elaborate on a detailed plan for establishment of multiple Security Councils: a Peacebuilding Council, a Climate Security Council, and a Health Security Council as subsidiary organs of the General Assembly.

Challenges and developments

The failure of the UN Security Council to agree on a resolution on COVID-19—despite the fact that the new disease hit all permanent five (P5) members so heavily — is yet another breakdown that has revealed the Council's impotence on preventing and stopping global catastrophes. The UN Security Council, whether ignorant or paralyzed by vetoes, failed to act when crimes against humanity were repeatedly committed in Syria, Yemen, Myanmar, Gaza, and other parts of the world. Millions of lives could have been saved and tens of millions of displacements could have been avoided if the Security Council had lived up to its responsibility and taken proper action. The Security Council demonstrated a continuous reluctance to recognize, let alone address, the severe security implications of climate change, which poses one of the greatest threats to life as we know it. The size of the Security Council has not changed since 1965 and, despite continuous efforts, the prospects for reform are at best remote. Many proposals have been made, including the 8+8+8 model,[4] but none of them have produced any serious impact thus far.

Reform of the Security Architecture of the UN Secretariat

Some institutional innovation has been achieved outside the Security Council. Important reforms have been initiated by the current UN Secretary-General and undertaken within the UN Secretariat. The re-organized Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) and Department of Peace Operations (DPO) now jointly oversee eight regional divisions, each managing peacekeeping operations, special political missions, and non-mission settings, supported by both Departments as well as the expanded Peacebuilding Support Office. This new architecture enjoys shared administration and services and is expected to achieve higher coherence in its approaches to deeper integrated planning of transitions to peace and closer partnerships with regional organizations.

The reform of the security architecture of the Secretariat has already demonstrated some benefits. The delegation of management authority helped better align political priorities with available resources in mission settings. Interaction with the new Resident Coordinator system has augmented the range of tools that support regional and country-based conflict prevention and peacebuilding. Over time and with sustained support, peace efforts can become increasingly adaptive, focus on feasibility and cost-efficiency, empower local organizations, and produce greater accountability.

The Secretariat, however, is often reliant on the authority and mandates of the Security Council. If the Security Council continues to fail to address or agree on major global security threats, the desire and support for establishing parallel Councils will accumulate. These Councils can have stronger representational membership by including Member States willing to contribute new ideas and increased capacities. The establishment of the proposed new Councils is entirely possible

within the General Assembly's authority to create subsidiary organs under Article 22 of the UN Charter **without amendment**. Similarly, the General Assembly can adopt all budgetary decisions needed to support the new Councils' work.

Precedents for institutional change

In the early 1960s, four of the P5 initially objected to an increase of the size of the Security Council from eleven to fifteen members, but once the General Assembly moved ahead and adopted a resolution, these four permanent members conceded and ratified the expansion.[5] The establishment of the International Criminal Court (ICC) was opposed by three of the P5, but once it became operational, the Security Council referred situations, such as Darfur and Libya, to be investigated by the Court.[6] Some regional organizations—ECOWAS in Liberia (1990-91), Organization of American States in Haiti (1991-92), African Union in Sudan (2005) — acted first without waiting for mandates from the Security Council, which later acknowledged and welcomed these early regional steps, building up cooperative relationships between the Security Council and regional organizations. The Security Council in the last twenty years has engaged in thematic debates and adopted a variety of thematic resolutions—on protection of civilians, counter-terrorism, non-proliferation, children in armed conflict, women in peace and security—[7]and the veto never came into play on such thematic resolutions.

Another remarkable precedent is the establishment of the Human Rights Council in 2005, which replaced the Human Rights Commission, despite having such an anti-multilateralist as John Bolton on the post of US Permanent Representative in New York. The creation of UN Women is another excellent example where several existing UN bodies merged to create a stronger unified UN organ to address gender inequality, exploitation, sexual violence, and promote the role of women in peace and security. A further positive example is the UN evolution on counterterrorism: after 9/11, the Security Council established a unique Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate tasked with monitoring state compliance to counter-terrorism obligations and identifying any needs for technical assistance. In 2006, following the adoption of the UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy by the General Assembly, the system moved to establish a centralized hub for the coordination and delivery of capacity-building assistance—the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism—that collaborated with over thirty UN entities and partners. This effort has focused on harmonizing responses and ensuring that legal, political, and operational frameworks enable more coordination.

The proposed three new Councils could take on specific tasks the current Security Council refers to them. But, if the Security Council is silent, the new Councils should have the initiative and resources to implement their program of work without waiting for referrals. As in the case with COVID-19, if the Security Council cannot agree on a decision, this should not stop the Health Security Council (if existent) from tackling this pressing global issue.

Multiple Security Councils

The Peacebuilding Council, the Climate Security Council, and the Health Security Council, with the P5 being permanent members in all of them, can unite the forces of both old and new powers in decision-making and problem-solving. They can engage the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), regional organizations, and other relevant stakeholders in bringing ideas, expertise, funds, determination, and human resources to the policy table. The new Councils would cooperate and work in coordination with the current Security Council by taking over agenda items such as peacebuilding, climate change, and pandemics, effectively alleviating its heavy agenda and making it easier to focus on international peace and security issues and Chapter VII actions.

The establishment of the new Councils does not need to happen simultaneously; they can emerge successively depending on feasibility, importance, and urgency:

- **PEACEBUILDING COUNCIL:** In terms of feasibility, it is the easiest to create by transforming and empowering the already existing Peacebuilding Commission (PBC), as already proposed and explained in the report "An Innovation Agenda for UN75. The Albright-Gambari Commission Report and the Road to 2020".[8]

- **CLIMATE SECURITY COUNCIL:** Arguably the most important body as it addresses one of the greatest global challenges to human survival. It would effectively approach security implications resulting from ever more frequent and intensive extreme weather disasters.

- **HEALTH SECURITY COUNCIL:** It is most urgently needed, especially considering how many lives have been lost to COVID-19 due to ignorance, lack of coordination, and deep gaps in global health governance.

The proposal for multiple Security Councils sends a strong message that, in case the P5 continue to block the UN reform, the General Assembly will resolve the impasse by establishing new bodies and re-orienting efforts into a positive direction. Over time, the P5 will realize that the new architecture will increase, not reduce their power. They will keep all their privileges and veto in the original Security Council but will share the burden of work and financing on issues of peacebuilding, climate change, and health with more actors.

Theoretically, other Councils can be envisaged, too, in the future, such as a Food Security Council, Oceans Security Council, or Cybersecurity Council. As important as such other issues are, this proposal prioritizes a Peacebuilding Council, Climate Security Council, and Health Security Council, considering the gravity of their respective focus areas and the lack of adequate international co-operation and mobilization to date.

Peacebuilding Council

The Peacebuilding Commission (PBC) was established in 2005 as a new organ to address a gap in motivation and capacity for long-term involvement in post-conflict zones, which often resulted in re-escalation of violence. The interactions between the Security Council and the PBC demonstrate a significant opportunity for burden-sharing and coordination that can be further enhanced. Issues such as prevention, early warning, security sector reforms, re-building institutions, and rule of law can come under the purview of the new Council instead of burdening the future agenda of the Security Council. Once the guns are silent and the parties cooperate, the Security Council can shift its attention to other, more hostile situations and leave the Peacebuilding Council to deal with countries where the violence has deescalated. A powerful and well-resourced Peacebuilding Council can monitor the transition to peace and, as a result, the situation may never return back to the Security Council's agenda. The P5, as permanent members of the Peacebuilding Council, lose nothing; they continue to fully participate in its decision-making.

The composition of the Peacebuilding Council can inherit the current membership of the PBC—thirty-one Member States elected from the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Economic and Social Council—and add a few larger financial contributors, therefore allowing more actors to directly participate in international peace and security. For example, while Japan cannot constitutionally undertake military engagements abroad, it has a track record of active engagement in peacebuilding projects and activities, which will naturally make it a leader of the future Peacebuilding Council. Similarly, Japan can be a permanent member of the Climate Security Council and the Health Security Council, also having a remarkable record of know-how and contributions on their agenda issues. And, if Japan is a permanent member of all three new

Councils, it might decide not to knock on the door and demand permanent membership in the current Security Council.

A further rationale of having a Peacebuilding Council is that it can become an organ that anchors preventive tasks and operations, currently spread among several offices, in one place. Every Secretary-General has spoken about the importance of prevention, but not one has so far established a system-wide comprehensive strategy and institutionalization of prevention. Finally, the Peacebuilding Council could replace the all-but-defunct Trusteeship Council. The 2020 Peacebuilding Review will crucially assess the current status and evolution of the PBC and its recommendations can be taken into consideration for the establishment of the new Council.[9]

Climate Security Council

Climate change is, and will be, the major threat to human survival for a long time to come. The Security Council had a thematic debate on climate change as early as 2007, but it could never produce an entirely comprehensive resolution since then. Despite a few country-specific resolutions recognizing climate-security links,[10] more proactive involvement is needed to address the impact of climate-related disasters on international peace and security.

Accordingly, a specific Climate Security Council can collectively tackle such disasters, as well as the security implications from other urgent environmental concerns such as loss of biodiversity, land degradation, deforestation, oceans level rise resulting in salinization of arable land, air pollution, etc. The Climate Security Council can work together with the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) Secretariat in Bonn, the International Panel on Climate Change, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in Nairobi, and other agencies, institutes, and networks. Instead of simply being a state-based organ, the Climate Security Council could involve actors from the business community, city mayors, indigenous groups, and philanthropists, among others.

This Climate Club idea, where members receive privileges proportionate to their emissions reductions, deserves attention as it eliminates the free-rider problems with the Paris Agreement.[11] The Climate Club membership is open to states committed to reducing CO_2 emissions by fixing an international carbon price and agreeing to implement policies that produce a minimal domestic target price. That target might rise over time, making a carbon-rich economy more costly. The Club idea motivates countries acting in self-interest to enter and undertake emission reductions to benefit from the privileges of the membership. The Climate Club does not alternate or substitute the various mechanisms under the 2015 Paris Agreement for Climate Change aimed at transparency, technology transfer, funding, facilitation, etc. Rather, it represents an additional supportive agency, raising ambition and compliance.

Health Security Council

In the past, the Security Council adopted consensual resolutions on HIV/AIDS (2000) and Ebola (2014). However, it failed to adopt a quick and decisive common text on COVID-19. A future Health Security Council can nicely bridge the political and functional parts of the WHO and other global health organizations. While blame for inaction has often been targeted at the political ineffectiveness of the health institutions, there have been important functional successes in global health, such as the eradication of smallpox, polio, leprosy, and other diseases on which the new Council can build. The distinction between the political and functional levels suggests a complex and multi-layered institution, but it matters little in practice where political and functional issues are increasingly and inextricably inter-linked.

COVID-19 is a wake-up call that compels states to make fundamental adjustments in the ways they anticipate and handle global threats. Integrated analyses of potential crisis drivers are needed, and these would be better initiated and orchestrated by a Health Security Council rather than the

under-capacitated WHO. Previous projects have typically been sector-based one-offs, rarely looking beyond the immediate challenges. For example, Ebola swept West Africa and aid flooded in to contain the disease while diarrhea and malaria were killing people in large numbers every day. Health workers were able to earn much more if they worked on the Ebola response instead of at local health centers. This has been typical of WHO responses to infectious disease outbreaks and epidemics originating in developing countries. Taxpayers in donor countries might argue that there is nothing wrong if their money is selectively used to keep dangerous infectious diseases out of their backyard. However, such an approach results in an excessive focus on short-term technical interventions instead of longer-term capacity building and resilience, health promotion, and community engagement.

COVID-19 severely undermined the WHO's position, a result of acrid exchanges between the USA and China, but also from spreading populism and protectionism, reducing exports of essential commodities, such as masks and protective equipment. While sovereign nations reserve the right to protect their people, the future global health collaboration should not fade away.

The G20 statement on COVID-19 gives a glimmer of hope by calling upon countries to share resources and information, expressing unequivocal support for the WHO mandate. It emphasized the concern for the most vulnerable people and underlined equity as an important principle in the response to COVID-19. It was remarkable to see even developing countries, despite facing their own health crisis, rising to the occasion. For example, India played an important role in the creation of a South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation emergency fund to fight COVID-19 and delivered various medical supplies and testing equipment to its neighbours in South Asia. A Health Security Council, which can engage the World Bank and the IMF, would emerge as a stronger organ than WHO, able to promote a holistic approach and—similarly to the other new Councils—convene a larger number of states, regional organizations, academic, and business communities.

The Way Forward

In the context of successful institutional innovations outside the gridlocked debate on Security Council reform, the establishment of three new Councils is a promising way forward, especially if the Security Council continues to be ineffective in the face of global challenges as well as unrepresentative of the twenty-first century political and economic reality. The new Councils can foster high-level, focused attention to key issues, cooperate with the rest of the UN, enjoy the UN's global convening power, and innovate and create platforms to draw upon the best expertise in the world. They can also develop integrated analytical capacity that the UN currently does not possess, identify potential short-term and long-term perspectives, and anticipate and monitor not merely the drivers of crises alongside, but also how these crises can be prevented or mitigated.

Major global concerns—reemergence of armed conflicts, climate change, and pandemics—can be managed by stronger and more representative global governance organs, a task that goes beyond the capacities of any coalition of Member States. Emerging powers, middle and small states, and non-state actors can all contribute to the new Councils, offer expertise, solutions, commitment, and resources.

Further research and brainstorming on the idea of multiple Security Councils should be conducted by an independent commission on the future of global governance supported by the Secretary-General to follow on the intergovernmental process immediately post-UN75, with the aim to gather support among the majority of the UN Member States.

The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated in the starkest terms that our survival depends on managing challenges in a responsible and coordinated fashion. Multiple Security Councils are needed to anticipate and monitor both short-term and long-term threats as well as to take efficient action by involving public and private institutions, helping states build resilience, avoid zero-sum thinking, and promote cooperation.

Endnotes

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The lack of reform of the UN Security Council and its inefficiency in addressing rising global security challenges can be solved by establishing three additional, parallel Councils: a Peacebuilding Council, a Climate Security Council, and a Health Security Council. Each would focus on a specific "soft security" agenda, have better representation amongst its members, operate transparently, and would not allow vetoes in order to ensure greater probability of action and agreement. The current Security Council continues to deal with the "hard security" agenda, the peaceful resolution of disputes under Chapter VI of the UN Charter, and Chapter VII actions in response to threats to international peace and security. The new Councils would have a larger configuration of representative member states with emerging powers joining older ones as permanent members to contribute ideas, expertise, funds, services, and capacities while strengthening international peace and security. This is a win-win formula: it protects all privileges of the current permanent five members but also gives emerging powers a stronger voice and ability to participate in world peace. Although unlikely to happen immediately post-UN75, this innovative model could be taken up seriously by governments committed to multilateralism, major regional organizations, and the UN Secretary-General in the coming years.

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