



Power: Who Lacks It, Who Has It, & Who Needs It: Decolonizing UN Peacekeeping and Reforming Global Human Rights Governance

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I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United Nations, since its inception, has experienced cases of peacekeeping missions failing to uphold human rights mandates; these failures are structurally rooted in imbalances within the UN system itself. From how the Security Council's power is structured, the dominance of the global north, to the marginalization of local actors all combine in perpetuating cycles of ineffective, unaccountable, and neocolonial interventions. These cycles create long-lasting, heavy impacts on the lives of the people involved, and to those here in America. Change, through reforming the Security Council and human rights mandates, is the only path forward.

II. OVERVIEW

While it is said that the United Nations has solved more problems than it's created, it is nonetheless important to understand that despite its foundational principles, the UN has failed to uphold human rights during many of its peacekeeping missions, particularly in post-colonial and conflict-affected regions¹. These failures are, however, not incidental. Structural imbalances rooted in a power

framework that protects the privileges of the Global North, particularly within some of its more influential bodies like the Security Council, and marginalizes local actors in the Global South that are most affected by intervention, undermine the organization's effectiveness and legitimacy².

Most modern peacekeeping missions are formulated and executed without meaningful input from local leaders and those on the ground. The result? A top-down, extremely driven approach that echoes colonial patterns of control in which local actors are treated as passive recipients rather than active participants. The declared agenda of human rights, too, are often criticized for reflecting Western norms and being a thinly veiled attempts at advancing Western priorities, leading to widespread perceptions of bias and selective enforcement.

A. Relevance

Today's international political climate is increasingly defined by lowering trust in global institutions as demands for equity, justice, and decolonization grow³. Armed conflicts, climate induced displacement, and other crisis ever-growing in complexity and scale are necessitating effective peacekeeping and human

¹ (Cohen 2024)

² (Alcover et al. 2024)

³ (Barghouti 2024)

rights mechanism now more than ever⁴. Without fundamental reform, UN missions run the risk of deepening instability and resentment in the very regions they aim to help. This isn't just an issue of improving efficiency, It's not even about restoring credibility to a system founded on justice, representation, and accountability; it's about the human lives at risk. Movement to decolonize peacekeeping and reform in human rights governance offers a path towards a more democratic, and importantly, equitable international order.

III. HISTORY

A. Early UN Action (1945-1970)

Founded in late 1945 in San Francisco in the aftermath of World War II, the early decades of the UN were defined by an aspirational goal to maintain international peace and security. These early decades of UN peacekeeping quickly, however, came to be shaped by Cold War geopolitics in a power structure dominated by the Allied victors in the form of the Permanent 5 members of the Security Council⁵. It is in this context that early peacekeeping missions, such as those in Palestine under UNTSO in 1948 and in the Congo under ONUC in 1960, were often sharply limited in scope⁶. They were forced to operate under principles of neutrality and noninterventional in domestic affairs. But these early missions also served to highlight growing tensions between newly decolonized states and the Western-Dominated leadership of the UN. While the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 did lay a foundational framework, enforcement was weak and practically

nonexistent due to typically mirroring the interest of powerful member states rather than those of emerging post-colonial nations.

B. Middle UN History (1971-2001)

The decline of the Soviet Union and the post-Cold War period marked a rapid expansion of UN peacekeeping, with missions becoming much more complex and multifaceted. Peacekeepers were now tasked not just with maintaining ceasefires organized by the UN, but with nation-building, electoral assistance, and human rights monitoring, as see in missions like UNTAC in Cambodia in 1992 and UNMIK in Kosovo in 1999⁷. However, this era also saw some of the UNs most egregious failures: Rwanda in 1994 and the former Yugoslavia in 1995 where UN peacekeeping failure permitted genocides⁸. The mass loss of life exposed deep structural flaws stemming from unclear mandates, inadequate resources, and a lack of accountability systems. It is here where we find the claim that UN peacekeeping was perpetuating neocolonial dynamics. And fueling this claim was the notion that local involvement was limited and Western states were disproportionately shaping missions and their mandates.

C. Present UN Action (2001-Present)

Recent years have seen a rush of UN officials and agencies recognizing the need to reform both its peacekeeping operations, and the broader systems of human rights governance. Ineffective and politicized veto power in the Security Council has stagnated any reform, but initiatives such as the Human Rights Up Front policy and the Action for Peacekeeping agenda implement some necessary reforms, while the replacement of the

⁴ (Benomar 2024)

⁵ (Stein 2000)

⁶ (Stein 2000)

⁷ (United Nations Security Council 1992)

⁸ (United Nations Security Council 2000)

Commission on Human Rights to the Human Rights Council signaled a shift in global priorities⁹. But, implementation has remained uneven. Some critics have argued that decision-making is still concentrated in the Global North, with local voices continuing to be sidelined. Moves to decolonize the UN's operations have gained traction. Some states and officials have urged shifting power towards host countries, incorporating indigenous knowledge, or democratizing the Security Council's authority. Yet entrenched veto powers, with only Britain and France signaling genuine willingness to reform, and geopolitical rivalries have continued to block many meaningful changes¹⁰.

IV. POLICY PROBLEM

A. Stakeholders

Given the continued and prolonged conversation about the P-5 and their veto power, along with the aforementioned host nations, it is thus that these are two of the primary stakeholders.

Firstly, it is important to note is how the Security Council works. Comprised of 15 total members, seats are divided into geographic regions, 3 for Africa, 5 for Western Europe and Other grouping, etc., with elections among each geographic group to decide who to send to the UNSC¹¹. For example, Guyana was elected by the Latin American group to serve for the term of 2023-2025¹². Of these 15 however, 5 are permanent members who do not face election from their geopolitical bloc. These are: The United States, The United Kingdom, France,

Russia, and China. Already, issues are evident. All 5 come from the global north, 4 of 5 are predominantly white, 3 of 5 are from Europe, and 2 of 5 from Western Europe specifically.

Although all are guilty of perpetuating the issue, not all are equally guilty. France and the United Kingdom, for example, have been far more open to reform than the other 3 members, and it has been jokingly said that they have not used their coveted veto power for anything of consequence since 1956. In fact, France and the United Kingdom have rarely used their veto power alone, and have instead used it in conjunction with the United States¹³.

The United States is the second most frequent user of the weaponized veto power. It wields this power to shield allies, particularly Israel, from any unfavorable resolution¹⁴. If France and the UK are using their veto power, it is alongside the US. If the US is using its veto power, it is likely doing so alone.

Also using veto power alone is its most frequent user: Russia¹⁵. Although the US has been in the news a lot for its high visibility use of veto power on the conflict in the Middle East, Russia has, since the inception of the UN, been the single largest user of the veto. It has vetoed many resolutions on the Assad regime in Syria, to the invasion of Ukraine in 2014 and 2022, particularly against any resolution that even so much as slightly frames intervention as threats to sovereignty.

⁹ ("Human Rights Up Front" Initiative" 2016)

¹⁰ (*Eurasia News & Press* 2022)

¹¹ (United Nations, n.d.)

¹² (*News Room* 2023)

¹³ ("Changing Patterns in the Use of the Veto in The Security Council", n.d.)

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

Right in the middle of the P-5 is the world's second most powerful nation: China. The pattern behind its behavior is far more simple to understand, too. If a resolution attempts to propagate human rights, you can expect China to veto it¹⁶. It vetoed resolutions on the genocide in Myanmar, it has protected North Korea, it has defended Zimbabwe, and of course would veto resolutions regarding its own actions in Hong Kong, Xinjiang, or Taiwan. Aside from France and the United Kingdom, the other three members very obviously care to protect their institutional power.

But they're not the only stakeholders. Host countries, often from the Global South, have an outsized importance on this matter. These are nations where the interventions happen, Haiti, Congo, Syria, etc., but are regularly excluded from genuine decision-making regarding those missions. Infamously, the Congo Crisis of the 1960s shows this in full display. Where the government felt the peacekeeping mission was to secure the government's integrity, the UN's official position was to remain neutral on internal conflict¹⁷. The end result? One of the most controversial and complicated missions ever. Also important: the actual troop-supporting nations. These are typically from the Global South as well, with Kenya famously providing a massive amount, but having limited strategic input.

These three groups: the P-5, Global South host countries, and Global South supporting countries, make up the bulk of stakeholders facing the need

for reform in one way or another.

B. Risks of Indifference

The risk of indifference is evident. A rapid decline in global trust in international institutions, particularly among the Global South, perpetuates cycles of global isolations at a level we have not seen since the lead up to World War II¹⁸. We've seen the US leave the United Nations Human Rights Council, the premier human rights agency within the UN, and the World Health Organization; The United Kingdom leaving the European Union; The Citizenship Amendment Act of 2019 in India; and more, all perpetuate an '*us vs them*' mentality among national governments. Put bluntly, the lessons of the past are being forgotten because the mistakes of the present have blinded us so. More and more people are seeing isolationism as a response to the weaknesses of the international system, but it was that same thought process that led to World War II, and to a degree, World War I.

This also has a direct impact on human life¹⁹. And this is a risk that is, and will, further be felt immediately here in America. The UN has sent six missions to Haiti in total, each one failing to address core issues and fueling further instability. And looking at those six missions in Haiti, we've seen the continuation of human rights abuses. The first mission, UNMIH, failed to disarm the paramilitary groups that threatened the country, and thus laid the groundwork for further political violence. The second mission, UNSMIL, again failed to address the political root causes of the issue. UNTSMIL, the third mission, had an impossibly short mandate. MIPONUH, the fourth, failed to build trust with civil society. MINUSTAH was responsible for a cholera

¹⁶ ("Changing Patterns in the Use of the Veto in The Security Council", n.d.)

¹⁷ (Boulden 2002)

¹⁸ (Trithart and Romier 2025)

¹⁹ (Duursma et al. 2023)

outbreak and sexual abuse scandals²⁰. BINUH, the most recent mission, has been ineffective in solving the political crisis.

The pattern? The failures of accountability systems, short missions, and authoritative approaches that ignored local needs have failed to help stabilize Haiti and have resulted in it being the only failed state in the Americas²¹. The impact on America has been felt for years. Seas of Haitians try to flee the young country with every wave of instability, sending waves of migrants to the United States, with most settling in my own home of Miami²². The UN's failure to act decisively regarding Venezuela has resulted in over half a million migrants flooding to the United States, and again, a massive amount settle in Miami²³. The strain on resources and infrastructure in the US because of it cannot be understated. The failure in Haiti and Venezuela highlights what is possible elsewhere without reform, and further underscores that indifference to this crisis can be deadly.

C. Nonpartisan Reasoning

While reform has been politicized, it is not a zero-sum proposal. It is about enhancing mission effectiveness. So many missions have historically failed at their goals because of the structural weaknesses in the UN. Without change, conflict spill over, humanitarian crisis, and displacement will continue to be seen at heightened levels. The status quo has proven itself to be untenable. If Republicans want to curb immigration, then it is worth analyzing how the failures of peacekeeping create migration surges. If Democrats seek to stabilize an ally, then it is worth analyzing how peacekeeping fails to do so. Across the spectrum, everyone benefits from change.

²⁰ (Chan et al. 2023)

²¹ (Taylor 2023)

²² (Dain and Batalova 2023)

²³ (Amaya and Batalova 2025)

V. TRIED POLICY

Calls for reform have existed for years, and seen varying degrees of success. The UN Security Council used to have 11 members up to 1965 when four more seats were added for a total of 15²⁴. This was done because decolonization saw many new states emerge in Africa, states that were entirely excluded from the Security Council until the addition of the designated African Seats.

Failures in peacekeeping in Rwanda and Bosnia resulted in deep introspection, and with the 2000 Brahimi report resulting in some procedural changes, but nowhere near enough to challenge deeper structural issues²⁵. The UN Commission for Human Rights was completely abolished and replaced with the UN Human Rights Council in 2005, and did significantly improve global credibility and broadened global representation²⁶. But the lack of enforcement power in this agency meant that these changes were largely for naught.

The UNs failures in Sri Lanka in 2009 ended up resulting in the *Human Rights Upfront Initiative* of 2013.²⁷ The lofty goal expressed something that should have been done before. It finally integrated human rights into all UN operations. But a lack of enforcement power, again, failed to address the structural reforms necessary.

Two more major reforms would rise, the *High-Level Independent Panel on Peace Operations* in 2015 and the *Action for Peacekeeping* plan both sought further reform²⁸. But, again, offered no structural changes necessary to address core issues.

VI. POLICY OPTIONS

[1] Reform The Security Council Structure

²⁴ (Weiss 2003, 147-161)

²⁵ (Ngichabe 2019, 4)

²⁶ (Short 2008)

²⁷ (Gilmour 2019)

²⁸ (The United Nations Security Council 2015)

As described before, the current UNSC expresses a long-gone post World War II world view. We've seen two major eras in global history come and go: the immediate post-war era and the Cold War, and yet the UNSC still expresses a perspective that hasn't existed for 60 years. Continuous deadlock during times of great crisis, and a very selective enforcement of human rights, has led to a widespread legitimacy crisis. Two immediate reform options that the American government could pursue the UN to adopt come to mind: Veto Power constraints, and expanded permanent membership.

The veto power of the permanent members has long been the biggest weakness of the UNSC. Beginning in 2015, France and Mexico launched a proposal to limit the use of the veto, particularly regarding resolutions and motions pertaining to mass atrocities. The move was incredibly popular, having received the signature of 104 other national governments, and both UN Observer states by 2022²⁹. But without the support of the permanent 5, this push falls flat. If the US were to agree to this, the added pressure on China and Russia to agree might be the final push needed. However, America agreeing to this has no guarantee that China and Russia would. And until they do, all agreeing to this plan would achieve would be the limiting of America's diplomatic capabilities.

The second is far more likely: the expansion of the permanent members. The US has expressed interest in adding new members to the permanent 5, as have other members of the P5. This comes in the form of the G4. Four states whose contributions to international peace and security have gained them the support of more than one member of the P5 in their bid for a spot as a permanent member. These are: Brazil, Japan,

India, and Germany³⁰. These four also mutually support each other as well. Although, they have the support from some P5 however, they face many detractors, with the United for Consensus, a group of 15 nations, joining to stand against the G4³¹.

The most grounded reform pathway would be the addition of three new permanent members: one for Africa, who remains unrepresented in current proposals, one for Latin America, and an additional seat for Asia. The selection for who in specific is far more difficult and comes down to the ideas attempted to be represented. Simply and ideally, they are a dedication to peace building, a track record with human rights, and being well respected amongst their regional bloc. Who America should support quickly spirals into a difficult question, but here is the answer I think would result in the most benefit.

Asia and Latin America are the easiest to decide upon. Debate is centered on Mexico vs. Brazil. While both are regional leaders, Brazil has the largest population and economy of all of Latin America³². Both are still relatively new democracies, Brazil transitioning in the 1980s and Mexico in the 2000s, but have made great strides towards the defense of human rights and institutional protection of peace^{33 34}. What puts Brazil over Mexico is its proven record in peacekeeping. Mexico has historically pursued a policy of neutrality, while Brazil has been more proactive in working with the UN. For this, Brazil has been elected ten times as a nonpermanent member, behind only Japan³⁵. As such, America pushing to place power in the

²⁹ (Global Centre For The Responsibility To Protect 2015)

³⁰ (The United Kingdom and France 2008)

³¹ (The United Nations General Assembly 2005)

³² ("Brazil and Mexico Compared", n.d.)

³³ (Tosta and Coutinho 2015)

³⁴ (Lewis 2020)

³⁵ ("Countries Elected Members | Security Council", n.d.)

hands of Brasília grants representation to a region by a member who leads it.

Given that Japan holds the record for most times elected to the UNSC at 11, it is no surprise that the pick should be Japan³⁶. However, a debate between Japan and India exist. Japan has been a huge contributor to the United Nations, just behind the United States, and has been a longtime contributor to global peace through it³⁷. India, however, is the world's single largest democracy and a rising power. What decides who gets the seat, even so, is their involvement in current conflict. India is embroiled in conflict against Pakistan and both are nuclear armed. Japan, however, has a constitutional provision ensuring peace.³⁸ So, given Tokyo's track record, it's no surprise that the American government has been most supportive of Japan's bid.

The most difficult region to discern is Africa. Many plans even exclude Africa entirely, but when almost 11 of the top 10 countries that contribute peacekeepers are African, their representation is pivotal³⁹. And this quickly becomes a 4-way debate. South Africa is one of the most stable democracies on the continent, but has an inconsistent human rights diplomatic record with Russia and Zimbabwe⁴⁰. Nigeria has a massive population and works with many peacekeeping missions, but is plagued by internal instability and corruption⁴¹. Egypt is often a leader among African states, but is the most authoritarian of the three mentioned so far⁴². And so who is the pick? Kenya. Despite challenges, its democracy remains relatively unscathed; it leads mediation and peace efforts across the Horn of

Africa and within the African Union; it hosts many UN agencies, which is uncommon for nations in the Global South; and has a strong civil society and human rights track record⁴³. The largest argument against Kenya's inclusion would be, I admit, that it is a smaller player at times than the other three states mentioned. But despite this, it remains one of the most respected African states and partner between the Global South and Global North in a way South Africa, Egypt, and Nigeria are not. Nairobi thus stands as a shining beacon for the Global South.

America has yet to show any interest in adding any member of the African continent to the P5, but doing so is pivotal if America, and the United Nations at large, is to have a foreign policy that centers democracy and human rights in a way that is equitable and conscious.

[2] Decolonize Human Rights Norms and Enforcement

Part of the identified issue thus far is that missions are often designed by external observers, America, donors, and the other P5. But this tactic leads to decreased effectiveness and legitimacy for these missions. As such, the solution here seems easiest: make host countries co-authors on their own peacekeeping mandates. Such a consultation process ensures that peacekeeping missions represent the international community aiding a state in need, not enforcing international law on a region. It creates legitimacy that is otherwise absent⁴⁴.

But to ensure accountability, power-sharing oversight is necessary. Local voices are typically silenced in accountability systems, and it's hard for the UN to hear concerns at the local level. Ensuring that the host country and civil society work alongside the UN promises to have reports

³⁶ (Ibid,35.)

³⁷ (The United Nations, n.d.)

³⁸ (Masood 2025)

³⁹ (Wilén and Williams 2025)

⁴⁰ (Orderson 2024)

⁴¹ (Freedom House 2019)

⁴² ("Egypt: Freedom in the World 2021 Country Report" 2021)

⁴³ (Freedom House 2025)

⁴⁴ (Gregory and Sharland 2023)

of violence or other failures be delivered faster and with a higher accuracy.

Alas, neither of the two solutions can work alone. Instead, both require increased partnership with regional organizations as well. Joint United Nations–African Union peacekeeping missions not only would decentralize power away from the P5 and the UN, but also include indigenous conflict-resolution that is absent in traditional conflict-resolution doctrine. This can be easily done. The United States, alongside France and the United Kingdom, can advocate for the further inclusion of regional groups, host countries, and new power-sharing oversight mechanisms. All that is required, particularly from the American government, is a desire to change.

[3] Democratize UN Peacekeeping Design and Oversight

The United Nations framework often reflects a collection of Western liberal values. Aside from the following accusations of cultural imperialism, the Global South is then saddled with added layers of monitoring while abuses by Western states go ignored⁴⁵. A shift in global culture on the issue is what is needed to address this. The Human Rights Council would need to increase input from indigenous groups and post-colonial legal system experts to encourage the pluralization of rights frameworks, not just Western ideas.

Broad-ranging accountability methods like universal jurisdiction would be necessary too.⁴⁶ Although universal jurisdiction is a controversial method as is, it, alongside independent review bodies, would be required to hold all states accountable for rights violations, regardless of geopolitical influence.

⁴⁵ (Biswas 2023)

⁴⁶ (Northeastern University School of Law, n.d.)

America seems least likely to adopt universal jurisdiction, and its abandonment of the Human Rights Council by the present administration means that this policy option is by far the most difficult to implement. Until a new administration that is more open to foreign cooperation exists, we cannot expect either of these changes.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The United States created the United Nations out of the ashes of the League of Nations. The United States must now again lead the charge to reform the international system. The effects on American daily life are vast — migrant waves crashing into America are the direct result of the UN's failure in many cases. The failure of the United Nations to uphold its own human rights mandates are not aberrations, they're symptoms of a wider sickness that has plagued the UN. A system that was never designed to be inclusive or representative, accountable or human. From Haiti to Rwanda, from Bosnia to Sri Lanka, these failures have been compounded by a Security Council that has been stuck frozen in the immediate post-WW 2 world for the past 80 years, human rights norms limited to western ideals, and mandates crafted by donors, not those in need.

The three reform proposals here — restructuring the Security Council, decolonizing norms, and democratizing peacebuilding — are not isolated. In fact, they should be taken together. Combined, they form a cohesive blueprint for modernizing an aging, ailing institution into one more effective and legitimate. The common thread here is power: who lacks it, who has it, and who needs it. Redistributing that power, not just symbolically, will determine whether the United Nations will be the tool of justice that it has the potential to be, or end up as a predecessor to yet

another future global institution. The UN has learned many lessons from the League of Nations, its own predecessor, but the ultimate question of any long-standing institution isn't what it can learn from others, but what can it learn from itself?

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