

UNGA and UNSC reforms

October 20, 2020

Though geopolitics have changed drastically, the UN Security Council has changed relatively little since 1945. Since 1993, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) has debated Council reform but has not been able to reach agreement. The reform of the Council is required to build a more effective and democratic global institution.

In news: UNGA in its 75th anniversary debated about UNSC reforms.

Placing it in syllabus: International organisations – United Nations

Static dimensions

1. What is UNSC?
2. Problems with UNSC and reforms needed

Current dimensions

1. In news
2. Reform Proposals: G- 4, Coffee Club

Content:

In news:

- At the virtual high-level meeting of the UN General Assembly to commemorate the historic 75th anniversary of the UN, Prime Minister Narendra Modi said that the **organization is facing a “crisis of confidence”**.
- He stressed the need for a **reformed multilateralism that reflects today’s realities**, gives voice to all stakeholders, addresses contemporary challenges and focuses on human welfare.
- Though much has been achieved in all these years, more needs to be done towards preventing conflict, ensuring

development, addressing climate change, reducing inequality and leveraging digital technologies.

- Hence PM Modi gave a call for reform of the United Nations itself so that it reflects the changing world order and accommodates the aspirations of emerging powers.
- As **India begins a two-year term on the Security Council from January, 2021 as a non-permanent member, for the eighth time** it hopes to use the opportunity to further strengthen its credentials for a seat as a permanent member.
- Its previous non-permanent terms were 1950-1951, 1967-1968, 1972-1973, 1977-1978, 1984-1985 and 1991-1992.
- The UNGA, in the session, committed itself to “instil new life in the discussions on the reform” of the UNSC.

Reform Proposals:

G-4:

- The **G4 nations** comprise **Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan** who support each other's bids for permanent seats on the UNSC.
- Its primary aim is the permanent member seats on the Security Council.
- Each of these four countries have figured among the elected non-permanent members of the council since the UN's establishment.
- Their economic and political influence has grown significantly in the last decades, reaching a scope comparable to the permanent members (P5).
- The United Kingdom and France have backed the G4's bid.
- **All the permanent members of P5 have supported India's bid for a permanent seat** but China is only ready to support India if India did not associate its bid with Japan.
- Brazil has received backing from three of the current

permanent members, namely France, Russia, and the United Kingdom.

Coffee club:

- Under the **leadership of Italy**, countries that strongly oppose the G4 countries' bids have formed the **Uniting for Consensus movement, or the Coffee Club, in 1990s**, comprising 40-odd member states.
- Most members of the club are **middle-sized states who oppose bigger regional powers grabbing permanent seats** in the UN Security Council.
- The prime movers of the club include Italy, Spain, Australia, Canada, South Korea, Argentina and Pakistan.
- It aims to counter the bids for permanent seats proposed by G4 nations and is **calling for a consensus before any decision is reached** on the form and size of the Security Council.
- Most club members want non-permanent seats of the Council increased, as this will raise their own chances of sitting on the Council regularly.
- Italy has also proposed that UK and France's permanent seats be replaced by a seat for the European Union to strengthen European efforts to develop a common foreign and security policy.

Other groups:

- The **African group** consists of members of the African Union which seeks two permanent and five non-permanent seats for Africa. It would preferably abolish the veto, but it insists that as long as the veto exists all permanent members should possess it.
- The **L69** consists of some 40 developing countries from all over the world, including Brazil and India. It seeks six new permanent seats and six new non-permanent seats balanced across UN regions. It seeks either the veto is

abolished or it is extended to all permanent members.

- The **Arab group** consists of 22 states and it demands a permanent Arab seat. It heavily criticises the veto, but does not present any solution to it.
- The **ACT** consists of 21 smaller member states, such as Ireland, Switzerland, Peru, Uruguay and Liechtenstein. The ACT concentrates solely on improving the working methods – accountability, coherence, and transparency of the Security Council so that all UN member states, not just the Council members, can take part in its decisions.

What is UNSC?

- The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of the six principal organs of the United Nations (UN).
- The UN charter gives **primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security** to the Security Council, which may meet whenever peace is threatened.
- Its powers include establishing peacekeeping operations, enacting international sanctions, and authorizing military action.
- **All members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Council.**
- The UNSC is the **only UN body with the authority to issue binding resolutions on member states.**
- It held its first session on 17 January 1946 at Church House, Westminster, London.
- It has permanent residence at the UN Headquarters in New York City.

Membership:

- The Security Council consists of fifteen members, of which five are permanent: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

- These were the great powers, or their successor states, that were the victors of World War II.
- Permanent members can veto any substantive resolution, including those on the admission of new member states or nominees for the office of Secretary-General.
- The remaining ten non-permanent members are elected on a regional basis to serve a term of two years.
- The body's presidency rotates monthly among its members.

Functions and powers:

- to maintain international peace and security in accordance with the principles and purposes of the United Nations;
- to investigate any dispute or situation which might lead to international friction;
- to recommend methods of adjusting such disputes or the terms of settlement;
- to formulate plans for the establishment of a system to regulate armaments;
- to determine the existence of a threat to the peace or act of aggression and to recommend what action should be taken;
- to call on Members to apply economic sanctions and other measures not involving the use of force to prevent or stop aggression;
- to take military action against an aggressor;
- to recommend the admission of new Members;
- to exercise the trusteeship functions of the United Nations in "strategic areas";
- to recommend to the General Assembly the appointment of the Secretary-General and, together with the Assembly, to elect the Judges of the International Court of Justice.

Problems with UNSC and reforms needed:

The flaws in UNSC are **inequality, exclusiveness, rotating**

seats, representation, inefficiency.

-> Inequality results from the veto and from the difference between permanent and non-permanent seats. The unequal design concentrates most of the power to the P5 who are then able to act in self-interest and ignore the rest of the UN. This means that even when there would be overwhelming support for the UN to act, a single member can make action impossible.

-> Exclusiveness results from limiting the Council's membership to a small portion of the total UN membership. This causes the Security Council to lack legitimacy, because it displays little awareness of the views of under-represented regions, such as the Middle East or the Small Island Developing States. Africa which is the subject of nearly 75 percent of the Council's work and the target of over 60 percent of all Security Council resolutions, but is severely under-represented.

-> The system of rotating seats results in unpredictability and randomness because Security Council decision-making and agenda setting follow the interests of its members.

-> The system of single countries representing their respective regions does not work, because states are unwilling to represent and to be represented by others. Proponents of regional representation, like Italy, see the European Union as the first potential candidate for a regional seat on the Council seat representing the interests of a large number of states. As UN Charter does not recognize regional organizations as eligible for membership in the UN, it could block the EU from becoming the first regional member of the Security Council.

-> Peacekeeping mandates continue to be scrutinized for their scope, cost, and cases in which peacekeepers themselves have committed abuses. In 2016, an investigation revealed a series of sexual assaults in the Central African Republic, where

minors were abused by peacekeeping soldiers from Burundi and Gabon.

Way to reform:

The Security Council has taken several steps to increase its efficiency and transparency in recent years.

- It now holds more public meetings and consults more frequently with external actors, including NGOs.
- It has also given other UN members the opportunity to speak before the Security Council and has made a special effort to enhance relations with troop contributing countries, meeting with them on a regular basis.
- In order to increase the effectiveness of sanctions, Council members have set up a sanctions-monitoring mechanism.
- At the administrative level, the Secretariat has launched a website, which provides easy access to the Council's discussions and decisions.

However, substantial reform can be achieved by **amending the UN Charter** which requires an affirmative vote and domestic ratification by two-thirds of UN member states. In addition to charter reform, **procedural changes, including greater transparency and closer consultations with troop-contributing countries** is required. It needs to gather information from external actors and other UN organs far more efficiently and further increase transparency of its proceedings.

Mould your thought:

1. Explain the powers and functions of the UN Security Council (UNSC). What needs to be done to make it more representative?

Approach to the answer:

- Brief introduction about UNSC
- Write its functions

- Write mainly about the G4, Coffee club proposals
- Conclude by saying how UNSC can be reformed