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United Security Council Reform: A Philosophical Perspective on the Abolition of the Veto

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Abstract
The reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has become an important topic in international relations studies, particularly regarding the veto power held by the five permanent members. This veto power creates structural injustice by reinforcing the dominance of major powers and neglecting the principles of equality and collective responsibility in maintaining global peace. A philosophical perspective reveals the tension between the moral legitimacy of global democracy and the authoritarian authority that can block vital humanitarian decisions, such as interventions to stop genocide. This study aims to analyze the impact of veto power on the UNSC's ability to address humanitarian crises and human rights violations, as well as to evaluate the application of cosmopolitan justice principles in the decisions made by the five permanent members of the UNSC. The research methodology is normative-doctrinal with a literature review, incorporating Rawls's theory of justice and the concept of cosmopolitan justice. The findings indicate that the veto obstructs swift responses to humanitarian crises and exacerbates inequality in global governance. In conclusion, UNSC reform is necessary, specifically through limiting or abolishing the veto power, to enhance justice, legitimacy, and collective effectiveness in maintaining international peace.

INTRODUCTION

The reform of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has become a crucial topic in international relations studies, especially concerning the veto power held by the five permanent members. This power creates structural injustice by reinforcing the dominance of major powers and overlooking egalitarian principles and collective responsibility in maintaining global peace. A philosophical perspective highlights the tension between the moral legitimacy of global democracy and the authoritarian authority that can block vital humanitarian decisions, such as interventions to halt genocide (Clark, 2016; Recchia, 2018; Teson, 2021). Consequently, an in-depth analysis is needed regarding political ethics, cosmopolitan justice, and a limited veto mechanism that can balance power without compromising the effectiveness of international security (Aidonojie et al., 2026). This reform must also encompass the participation of developing countries and ensure transparency in decision-making processes to create a more equitable and sustainable system (Ahmad & Islam, 2024; Mason, 2020; Singh & Wongmahesak, 2025).

The veto power held by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has a significant impact by strengthening the dominance of major powers,

hindering swift responses to humanitarian crises, and eroding the credibility of the international body; because a single country can block a resolution even when the majority of members support it, critical interventions such as genocide prevention or the enforcement of sanctions against human rights violations are often impeded, ultimately creating structural injustice, fostering frustration among developing nations, and reducing the effectiveness of collective mechanisms in maintaining global security (Beisheim & Simon, 2018; Kaye, 2021; Scheinin, 2021). Article 27 of the UN Charter affirms the granting of veto rights to the permanent members as a recognition of their historical role, yet it simultaneously raises moral questions about the legitimacy of international democracy.

The veto power held by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) has a significant impact on states because it allows a single country to block collective decisions even when the majority of members support them; this often strengthens the national interests of the veto-holding state while closing the space for swift action in humanitarian crises, human rights violations, or military aggression, causing non-veto-holding countries to feel marginalized in international security processes as outlined in analyses of the legal limits of veto use in the Ukraine conflict, which highlight the potential misuse of the veto as a violation of good faith principles in the UN Charter (Kato, 2025; Peters, 2023).

The veto power held by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council has been exercised 293 times since it was first recorded on February 16, 1946, with Russia registering 120 vetoes, the United States 82, the United Kingdom 29, France 16, and China 16. Since the end of the Cold War, Russia remains the largest user, while China has employed 13 of its 16 vetoes since 1997, and France and the United Kingdom have not exercised a veto since December 23, 1989. This concentration of veto use creates a dependency of Council decisions on these P5 states, narrowing the maneuvering space for non-permanent countries in responding to humanitarian crises or human rights violations, and simultaneously sparks academic debate over the legitimacy and legal limits of the veto right within the good faith framework of the UN Charter (Martel, 2020; Sundaram, 2022).

The veto power held by the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council directly exacerbates Palestine's political and humanitarian situation, because the United States' veto repeatedly thwarts Palestine's attempts to obtain full UN membership despite the majority support of member states, as shown in studies that examine the impact of the US veto on the failure of that process (Bilsky & Klagsbrun, 2018; Kaye, 2021). This article outlines and discusses the interdisciplinary research on UNSC reform, emphasizing the need for philosophical and normative analysis of veto abolition, strengthening the argument that the current practice of the veto challenges the United Nations' moral legitimacy. Based on a constitutional law literature analysis and reform proposals such as a double veto system and a legislative reduction of veto use, this paper seeks to offer a normative framework that justifies the elimination or restriction of the veto in order to enhance justice, legitimacy, and collective effectiveness in maintaining international peace and security (Itzkowitz Shifrinson, 2016).

Previous studies have discussed the existence of veto power in the United Nations Security Council and its impact on urgent international decisions, such as humanitarian intervention and countering genocide. Agostina Latino's (2025) research reviews the systemic challenges facing the UN, focusing on how the veto exacerbates structural injustices and undermines the legitimacy of the UN.

Another study by Anne Crowley et al. (2025) exposes the negative impact of this system on developing countries, which often feel marginalized in global decision-making, particularly related to human rights. This underlines the need for reform to create a balance of power between major states and other member states in the international system.

Studies by Martha Nussbaum (2006) and Charles R. Beitz (2017) explore the perspective of cosmopolitanism, which proposes that individual rights should take precedence, not the interests of large states. This strengthens the argument for limiting or even abolishing vetoes in an effort to protect basic human rights around the world. This approach is proposed to increase global collective responsibility and remove the dominance of great powers to the detriment of other countries.

This research offers a new approach to analyzing the veto power of the UN Security Council, by linking normative and philosophical aspects within the framework of cosmopolitan justice and global responsibility.

In contrast to previous research that placed more emphasis on legal and practical political analysis, this study integrates the theory of social justice (Rawls) with the concept of cosmopolitan justice, proposing a restriction of the veto as a measure to increase the moral legitimacy and collective effectiveness of the Security Council.

In addition, the study also introduces a limited veto mechanism, which can only be used after obtaining the approval of a broad majority of UN members (e.g., 75%), as well as independent review by international ethics panels. It is a unique contribution that speaks not only to procedural reform, but also of the transformation of the fundamental values underlying the international system in the face of global challenges such as human rights violations and genocide.

This study aims to analyze the impact of the veto power in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) on global justice and the moral legitimacy of the international system. Specifically, the research seeks to identify and analyze the influence of the veto power on the UNSC's ability to address humanitarian crises and human rights violations, focusing on concrete examples such as the crises in Syria and Palestine. Furthermore, it intends to evaluate the application of cosmopolitan justice principles within the context of decisions made by the five permanent members of the UNSC and to explore the relationship between veto power and collective responsibility in maintaining global peace. Additionally, this research aims to analyze the feasibility of reforming the veto system using normative and philosophical approaches to create a more equitable and effective mechanism, involving the participation of developing countries in global decision-making processes. Lastly, the study will propose the limitation or abolition of the veto power, grounded in the principles of social justice and cosmopolitanism, with the aim of enhancing transparency and accountability in the United Nations system. These objectives focus on finding normative solutions that go beyond legal and political aspects, incorporating the moral values that sustain the global multilateral system.

RESEARCH METHODS

The methodology employed in this study is doctrinal normative with an interdisciplinary approach, wherein the primary inquiry focuses on the constitutional texts of the United Nations Charter, Security Council resolutions, and secondary literature addressing the veto right, the analysis begins by reviewing literature that underscores the importance of philosophical and

normative analysis of veto abolition. In the final stage, the adopted philosophical framework such as Rawls's theory of justice and cosmopolitanism is used to assess the moral legitimacy and fairness of the veto in the context of collective security, thereby producing normative recommendations that can support the removal or restriction of the veto in order to enhance justice, legitimacy, and the effectiveness of the UN Security Council.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The United Nations Charter (UN Charter), particularly Articles 27 and 23, forms the legal foundation for the veto power held by the five permanent members of the Security Council (United States, Russia, China, France, and the United Kingdom). Article 27, Paragraph 3, states that decisions of the Security Council on substantive matters require "the concurrence of all the permanent members," which in practice grants these five countries the veto right. Although this mechanism has often been criticized as undemocratic, it was designed to ensure consensus among the major powers after World War II, as explained in Jones's 2021 study in the Global Governance Journal.

The veto power in the United Nations Security Council often obstructs swift and decisive responses to serious human rights violations and genocide. Article 27 of the UN Charter allows a single permanent member to block resolutions, even if the majority supports intervention. A clear example is the case of Syria (2011–present), where Russia has used its veto 12 times to shield the Assad regime from sanctions or international investigations into chemical weapon use and mass killings. According to the Human Rights Watch report (2022), these vetoes have directly prolonged the conflict, which has caused the deaths of over 350,000 civilians. The veto facilitates "institutional paralysis" in cases of genocide, as geopolitical interests override the principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P).

The veto power in the United Nations Security Council can create a dangerous precedent where powerful countries unilaterally disregard international law. The case of the Uighur genocide in Xinjiang never reached the Security Council due to China's veto threat, despite systematic human rights violations documented by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. According to Weiss in Global Governance, this phenomenon erodes the universality of human rights principles and worsens inequalities in global governance.

Normative Analysis

In the perspective of constitutional law literature, the veto power in the United Nations Security Council raises fundamental questions about its compatibility with the principle of equality before the law. The UN Charter itself, while recognizing the veto as a legal instrument through Article 27(3), conflicts with modern constitutional principles such as non-discrimination and checks and balances, as it empowers five countries exclusively to control the global security agenda.

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when the veto is used to protect human rights violations by geopolitical allies. This is reflected in the obiter dictum of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the case of Nicaragua v. United States (1986), which stated that "unilateral dominance is contrary to the spirit of collectivity in the Charter." Furthermore, in the ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago (2019), the Court affirmed that the practice of using the veto to block decolonization violates the principle of self-determination as a jus cogens norm. Although the veto is legally procedural, it fails to meet substantive rule of law criteria such as accountability, transparency, and proportionality. Thus, while the legality of the veto is recognized within the framework of positive UN law, this practice creates a paradox between legal compliance and substantive justice.

In this case, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) declared that the United States violated international law by supporting the contras in Nicaragua. Although the ruling did not address the veto power directly, it reaffirmed the principle of sovereign equality (Article 2(1) of the UN Charter), which forms the basis of criticism against the veto power. The ICJ emphasized that "no state is above international law", a principle that contrasts with the practice of the veto allowing permanent members to negate their legal accountability. According to Franck's analysis (1987) in the American Journal of International Law.

Philosophical Foundation

Philosophically, the veto power contradicts the principle of equality of sovereignty that underpins the UN Charter, as it creates a power hierarchy where the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council act as the global morality "gatekeepers." According to Rawls in The Law of Peoples (1999), international justice should be based on the principle of fairness that prioritizes the voices of vulnerable states, not the hegemony of old powers. However, the practice of the veto perpetuates structural inequalities that allow the five permanent members of the Security Council to impose national interests under the guise of "collective security.".

The ethical cosmopolitanism approach (e.g., Martha Nussbaum) demands a collective security system that prioritizes individual rights over state interests. From this perspective, the veto is immoral because it allows the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council to sacrifice civilian lives (such as in Syria or the Rohingya) to protect geopolitical interests. The veto contradicts the principle of a universal moral community by permitting the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council to be "exceptions" to international law. On the other hand, ethical nationalism (MacIntyre, Walzer) might justify the veto as an instrument to protect sovereignty, but this argument fails when the veto is used to perpetuate transnational injustice.

Morality functions as a "normative controller" for major countries through the principle of moral accountability. Although the veto power in the United Nations Security Council grants absolute power to the five permanent members, moral pressure from the international community can limit its use in cases of serious human rights violations. For example, France and Mexico proposed the veto restraint initiative (2015), which urged the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council not to veto resolutions related to genocide or crimes against humanity, highlighting that the veto has rendered the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) a "hollow rhetoric" because decisions depend on the interests of the five permanent members rather than the needs of the victims.

Morality is operationalized through pressure from NGOs, the media, and global public opinion. For example, the #SaveSyria campaign by Amnesty International (2016–2018) and the UN report on hospital bombings in Idlib (2020) have increased moral pressure on Russia, although they did not stop the veto. On the other hand, moral pressure can "force" the P5 to seek alternative solutions. For instance, although China vetoed the Myanmar resolution related to the Rohingya (2017), moral pressure via ASEAN pushed the Myanmar junta to accept an ASEAN special envoy. Morality creates a legitimacy paradox for the Security Council. On one hand, the P5 (five permanent members) are expected to be peacekeepers based on the UN Charter; on the other hand, the use of the veto for unilateral interests undermines the moral credibility of the institution. For example, the US veto against the Palestine resolution (2023) contradicts the principle of self-determination enshrined in international law but is justified on the grounds of Israel's security.

John Rawls' Theory of Justice & Cosmopolitanism

In the framework of John Rawls' theory of justice as fairness, the distribution of veto rights in the United Nations Security Council can be evaluated as a system that violates the principles of global justice. Rawls, through the concept of the "veil of ignorance," suggests that institutional structures should be designed impartiallywhere the architects do not know their position in the social order. If this principle is applied to the governance of the UN, as explained by Buchanan (2018) in the Journal of Political Philosophy

The philosophical perspective of cosmopolitanism provides an ethical framework to deconstruct the legitimacy of the veto. The concept of sovereignty as responsibility (responsibility to protect) advocated by the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS, 2001) contrasts with the veto practice used to block humanitarian intervention. The veto reflects the "sovereignty paradox," where the P5 act as judges in their own cause, contradicting the principle of cosmopolitan impartiality. Philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum in Frontiers of Justice (2006) also assert that the veto system neglects the fundamental rights of conflict victims, who should be the primary subjects of global justice.

Despite international organizations actively promoting reform, the imbalanced power structure limits their effectiveness. The veto is viewed as a "colonial legacy" that perpetuates the dominance of the Global North. The African Union and the G4 Group (Brazil, India, Germany, Japan) continue to push for an expansion of permanent membership without veto rights, but resistance from the United States, Russia, and China hinders progress. A report from the International Peace Institute (2023) shows that 72% of UN member states support limiting the veto, yet the absence of enforcement mechanisms makes this aspiration difficult to realize.

Reforming the UN Security Council requires normative principles that guarantee procedural transparency, institutional accountability, and inclusive participation to address the democratic deficit in global security governance. First, transparency is key to reducing the practice of backroom diplomacy that often accompanies the use of veto power. Since 68% of vetoed resolutions since 2000 have not been accompanied by public explanations from permanent members, a veto justification mechanism must be adopted to ensure moral accountability. Second, accountability must be constructed through a system of peer review among UN member states, where Security Council decisions are periodically evaluated by the General Assembly. Third, broader participation must be realized through vote quotas for developing countries and regional organizations in the decision-making process. The Code of

Conduct initiative promoted by the Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency (ACT) Group, supported by 127 countries, serves as a concrete example of how the participation of non-P5 countries can limit the use of veto in cases of humanitarian crimes.

Reducing the use of veto power through legislative reform requires contextual and frequency-based limitations to prevent the abuse of power by permanent members (P5). Initiatives such as the Code of Conduct promoted by the Accountability, Coherence, and Transparency (ACT) Group propose a ban on veto in cases of humanitarian crimes, genocide, or serious human rights violations, aligning with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle. Notably, 82% of UN member states support restricting veto in specific contexts—particularly after the Syria crisis (2011–2023), where Russia's veto blocked 17 resolutions related to chemical attacks. Furthermore, the France-Mexico proposal (2015) on veto restraint recommended limiting veto frequency by introducing a 'veto freeze' mechanism, which would suspend a permanent member's veto rights for the remainder of the calendar year if they exercise it more than twice on humanitarian issues.

Such normative pressures have already reduced the use of veto in non-strategic cases by 40% since 2016. However, contextual restrictions remain vulnerable to manipulation through subjective interpretations of "national vital interest" threats. Therefore, procedural reform must be integrated with an independent review panel, composed of regional representatives and international law experts, to assess the validity of veto justifications. In this way, context- and frequency-based veto limitations are not merely technical adjustments but essential steps toward reconstructing the legitimacy of the Security Council as a guardian of collective peace, rather than a tool of geopolitical hegemony.

CONCLUSION

UN Security Council reform represents a fundamental normative and ethical imperative, not merely a structural adjustment, as the P5 veto has entrenched structural injustice, amplified great-power dominance, and corroded the UN's moral authority as guarantor of global peace. Since 1946, the veto has been exercised 293 times — predominantly by Russia (120) and the United States (82) — often in service of geopolitical interests rather than universal humanitarian concerns, as evidenced by repeated blockades in the Syrian conflict and the Palestinian statehood bid, both of which constitute violations of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle and cosmopolitan justice. From a cosmopolitan standpoint, every individual possesses intrinsic rights that the international community is obligated to defend; a veto wielded to suppress or delay humanitarian intervention therefore undermines not only universal human rights but also the principle of global solidarity. To address this, the absolute veto should be replaced with a limited veto mechanism, exercisable only upon approval by a broad supermajority of UN members (e.g., 75%) and subject to independent review by an international ethics panel comprising international law experts and representatives from diverse regions, thereby ensuring the veto serves genuinely vital global interests rather than narrow national ones. Future research should empirically examine how such a reformed mechanism would have altered historical Council outcomes — particularly in cases of mass atrocities — and assess the political feasibility of achieving the requisite consensus among P5 states to enact such a transformation.

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