

# The Future of the United Nations

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## Introduction

If the United Nations Security Council continues to be ineffective in the “multipolar and chaotic era” of post-Ukraine war, the balance of power and nuclear deterrence will have to deter war among the major powers. The United States is adrift between its own priorities and multilateralism, while China is promoting a Chinese-style global governance strategy. This zero-sum game continues, with China filling the void when the US exits UN agencies.

Security Council reform has not progressed in over 30 years and has yet to generate negotiating momentum. Expansion of permanent seats is no longer the best option, and strategies need to be revised. In order to move reform forward, we must move toward Plan B, which includes the creation of a semi-permanent (or long-term) seat on the Council (four- to eight-year terms, with immediate reelections possible; the number of seats to be expanded is six to eight), rather than focusing on expanding the permanent membership, which is unlikely to get a two-thirds majority of member countries.

The process of Security Council reform should be two-stage. The first phase will achieve reform through the creation of a semi-permanent or longer-term member of the Council, and the second phase, reform regarding permanent members, will last until 2045 (the 100th anniversary of the UN). What kind of agreement on reform will be reached at the UN Future Summit in September 2024 and what kind of common understanding on global governance, including the Security Council, will be reached at the G20 Summit in Brazil in November will also be important.

With its national power in decline, Japan needs to abandon the illusion of a great power and strengthen its ties with the Global South and others as a representative of the global middle powers. Japanese diplomacy is also in need of change. Security Council reform is the touchstone for this.

There is no universal organization that can replace the UN. It is the mission of Japan and other like-minded nations to continue to seek reform and improvement of the UN and to make it an organization that will exist for more than 100 years.

## The UN in a Multipolar & Confused Era

The year 2024 marks the 79th anniversary of the end of World War II and the 35th anniversary of the demise of the Cold War. The world now faces many geopolitical crises, such as wars of

aggression by a major power and the resurgence of regional conflicts, in addition to natural threats to humanity and the earth, such as infectious diseases, disasters, and global warming.<sup>1</sup> The dysfunction of the Security Council, exposed by the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, has been chronic since the Cold War era, but it fundamentally calls into question the *raison d'être* of the UN. The post-Ukraine war world, in which the Security Council does not function at the critical moments and no country takes leadership to resolve the conflict, is a “multipolar and chaotic era” in terms of international order.<sup>2</sup> In such a world, wars among major powers must ultimately be deterred by classical order maintenance mechanisms based on geopolitics and the balance of power.

Fortunately or unfortunately, nuclear weapons, the leviathan created by World War II, and the veto of the permanent members of the UN Security Council have actually contributed to the deterrence of war among the major powers. Even so, the UN, as an international public good, should not only be utilized as a “bastion of peace” to deter the next world war, but should also be a center for the resolution of international disputes through a multilateralist approach.

If authoritarian leaders like Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping lead the undemocratic world, including the “axis of evil” of Russia, Iran, and North Korea, and if Donald Trump returns to the presidency in the November 2024 US presidential election and revives home-first principles, multilateralism and the liberal world order could quickly retreat. The world needs solidarity and cooperation as never before. With an eye on the post-Ukraine war world order, I would like to consider the nature and future of the UN and the possibility of reforming the Security Council as we approach the 80th anniversary of its founding.

## Ineffectiveness of the UN

The UN is reaching its limits in overcoming human crises. What can be said about the crisis facing the UN and the international community exposed by the pandemic and current wars is that, first, the role of sovereign states remains crucial in the management of infectious diseases and security crises that affect human life, and that national governments are at the center of the response. Second, the US-China and US-Russia conflicts are reflected in international organizations, with the World Health Organization (WHO) losing credibility due to the pandemic and the World Trade Organization

(WTO) continuing to be paralyzed in its dispute settlement function. The legitimacy, credibility, and effectiveness of international organizations that are supposed to be neutral are at stake. Third, the UN Security Council, which plays a central role in collective security, has failed to take effective action in Ukraine and Gaza due to US and Russian abuse of their veto, which shows that UN reform is a matter of urgency.

Already on April 15, 2020, the *Washington Post* severely criticized the US for its lack of leadership, Europe's hands are full with its own affairs, and China is acting selfishly. The same article further commented that the UN Security Council is not merely failing to function, it no longer meets its purpose, and the G7 and G20 are meeting but not taking immediate action.<sup>3</sup> A Dubai-based health expert commented, "The UN Security Council has been ineffective since the end of World War II." In short, the UN has just about prevented the outbreak of a third world war for 79 years, but it has exposed its incompetence since 2020, when it was hit by a once-in-a-century pandemic and an unexpected war of aggression by a permanent member. The ineffectiveness of the Security Council is now clear for all to see.

## Global Governance the Chinese Way

China's rise is remarkable, and it now competes with the US on all fronts. Until recently, four of the 15 UN specialized agencies were headed by Chinese – the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), the International Telecommunication Union (ITU), and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO). The UN Headquarters Secretariat includes the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), which is in charge of economic and social affairs. Its head under-secretary-general is also a Chinese national. DESA is a key department that oversees the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), environment, social development, and human rights issues, and has tremendous influence.

Although there was an unwritten rule that permanent members of the Security Council should refrain as much as possible from running for the heads of specialized agencies, China has behaved without regard for this. These organizations set global standards and international rules, and are directly related to economic security. China is actively sending its own personnel to the top positions of these bodies and is trying to expand its influence in UN organizations. On Oct. 13, 2020, the UN General Assembly held elections to change 15 of the 47 members of the Human Rights Council and elected China, Russia, and Cuba. The international human rights organization Human Rights Watch criticized China for its "massive human rights violations" and Russia for its "complicity in numerous war crimes in the Syrian civil war", and identified the three countries as "unfit" to serve on the Human Rights Council. The UN Human Rights Council and the Third Committee of the UN General Assembly have been powerless to denounce human rights

violations against people in Hong Kong, the Uighur Autonomous Region, and the Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region.

Thus, it is assumed that China has a long-term plan to prevent Western values from taking precedence by obtaining the posts of heads of the UN Secretariat and specialized agencies as part of its process to become a superpower. In his book, US-China expert Michael Pillsbury describes the danger of China further weakening the UN and the WTO as one of the scenarios that the "Chinese World Order in 2049" aims to achieve.<sup>4</sup> It is believed that China is pursuing a strategy of using the UN to achieve Chinese-style global governance in line with this very scenario.

## Drifting America

On the one hand, the US retreated from the UN and multilateralism under former President Trump's "America First" policy. It withdrew from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Human Rights Council, the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), and from the WHO. It also withdrew from the Paris Agreement on global warming. The zero-sum game continued, with China filling the void when the US left these organizations, and as a result China's influence increased. Since President Joe Biden took office, the US has returned to multilateralism again, rejoining the WHO and the Paris Agreement, but the US and China continue to compete and confront each other. At the US-China meeting at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in November 2023, both sides expressed recognition that the US and China are partners in competition, not confrontation, but tensions still persist over Ukraine and Taiwan. Successive US Democratic Party administrations have initially been idealistic, attempting to realize US-style values diplomacy in the multilateral arena. However, when that idealism hits a wall, they fall back on realism and inaction, and the results are intractable. As the US pursues realpolitik (diplomacy that protects national interests), idealism has no choice but to retreat. Nevertheless, as long as the US continues to pursue a course of international cooperation, the very survival of the UN and its international organizations will not be fundamentally undermined.

However, if Trump returns to the presidency in the November 2024 presidential election, the US emphasis on national interests and unilateralism may well be restored, the Security Council will continue to be dysfunctional, the UN and multilateralism will be greatly reduced, and the world will be forced to shift to a model of order maintenance based on geopolitics and balance of power domination by the major powers.

## Can the UN Be Reformed?

The UN is the center of multilateralism that creates international cooperation. Cooperation on global issues such as conflicts, terrorism, global warming, infectious diseases, development, and poverty must continue to be promoted mainly through the UN and

international organizations. When the national interests of each country are sublimated into the international public interest through multilateral negotiations, they become matters of common concern and cooperation is encouraged. This is the essence of multilateral diplomacy.

The UN and the Bretton Woods system are the crystallization of human wisdom, created at the great human cost of the two world wars. It is unrealistic and futile to rebuild the UN on the grounds that the Security Council is dysfunctional. I do not believe that such a drastic measure can be taken in peacetime. The UN should be improved and inherited, and this is the responsibility of all UN member states. For defeated countries such as Japan and Germany, which were not involved in the creation of the UN but enjoyed its benefits to the fullest under the UN-Bretton Woods system, the reform and succession of the UN can now be said to be their mission. It is in Japan's national interest to resolve international disputes and global issues within various multilateral frameworks, such as the UN, G7, and G20, and this will enhance the significance of Japan's existence, as it is becoming less of a great power. Strengthening multilateralism as well as coordinating bilateral relations, which is important for Japanese diplomacy, and fostering a spirit of international cooperation with democracies and countries of the Global South are the central tasks of Japanese diplomacy in the chaotic post-Ukraine war era, which is becoming a century of war.

To this end, it is necessary to reform the UN and international organizations that have become outdated, and Security Council reform is symbolic of this. It has been more than 30 years since Japan proposed Security Council reform in 1992. Although discussions have taken place in informal plenary sessions of the General Assembly, negotiations have been in name only, and the substance of reform has not moved one step forward. Security Council reform must be realized for the future of the UN, whose primary mission is conflict resolution and peacekeeping. However, in light of the objective situation of drastic changes in international affairs and Japan's declining national strength, it is necessary to reconsider whether aiming to expand the number of permanent seats on the UN Security Council as if it were a golden rule is the best option for Japan and the UN.

### Why Isn't Security Council Reform Making Progress?

Security Council reform gained momentum in 2005 when the so-called G4 (Japan, Germany, India, and Brazil) launched a diplomatic offensive by submitting a draft resolution to the General Assembly. However, their proposal, as well as the African Union (AU) and the Uniting for Consensus (UFC) proposals, were all withdrawn from the table.<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, with the relative decline in the national power of Japan and Germany, the momentum for Security Council reform has slowed down, and diplomatic offensives have not been undertaken.

In 1992, as director of the UN Policy Division of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, I was in charge of Prime Minister Kiichi Miyazawa's Security Council reform proposal, and from 2006 to 2008, as deputy permanent representative of the Japanese mission to the UN, I was involved in the follow-up of the G4 proposal. I would like to discuss specifically why reform has not progressed after more than 30 years and what reform is feasible.

Although all countries are in favor of Security Council reform in general, the complex interplay of national interests and stakes is a classic example of opposition on each side of the issue. Why have negotiations for reform not progressed? Simply put, it is because the positions of the interested countries (G4, AU, UFC, P5 (Permanent 5), etc.) are widely divergent and no common language (e.g., "common but differentiated responsibilities" in the case of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change) and common denominator have been found to guide negotiations. The US, Russia, China, and the UFC countries have been reluctant to enter into a deal based on specific wording. In other words, the momentum toward "win-win" (all win) or "lose-lose" (all lose), which is a necessary condition for successful multilateral negotiations, has not been generated as a result of the "negotiations" to date.

Regardless of how the war in Ukraine ends up, the choice must be made: whether to resign oneself to a deadlock over reform by still holding out hope for both permanent and non-permanent enlargement, which is unlikely to win a two-thirds majority in terms of negotiating dynamics, or to be pragmatic and take the next best thing, which is better than the status quo (*Table*).

### What Is Realistic Security Council Reform?

What will happen if Security Council reform does not proceed? Japan has been a candidate for non-permanent membership of the Security Council at intervals of three to six years, and has been elected 12 times, the most of any member country. The next opportunity for Japan to be a candidate for non-permanent membership of the Security Council is in 2032 eight years from now, and it will be increasingly difficult to become even a non-permanent member; thus it will not be possible to continue to wait patiently for a chance to expand the permanent membership of the Council. A drastic policy shift is needed to break through the stagnation of reform, using the deep disappointment in the Security Council expressed by member countries over the war in Ukraine as leverage.

The basic perceptions at that time are as follows.

1) As a lesson from the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, it is believed that the majority of countries recognize that the permanent membership of the Council should not be expanded and that the veto should be limited.

2) The US supports the expansion of both the permanent and non-permanent members of the Council, including Japan and Germany, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, but has not moved to do so on its own. It's nothing more than lip service (the US position

TABLE

## Comparison of the basic positions of each group

	Present	G4	Africa	UFC
Permanent Members	5 US, UK, France, China, Russia	+6 Asia 2, Africa 2, Latin America 1, West Europe and others 1		+0 Status quo
Non-Permanent Members	10 Asia 2, Africa 3, Latin America 2, West Europe and others 2, East Europe 1	+4/5 Asia 1, Africa 1-2, Latin America 1, East Europe 1	+5 Asia 1, Africa 2, Latin America 1, East Europe 1	Under +11 Includes newly created long term and re-electable non-permanent members.
Veto	Permanent members 5	New permanent members should have the same responsibilities and duties as current permanent members, but veto will not be exercised until after the 15-year review.	The veto should be abolished, but if it is to remain, the new permanent members should be given it.	All permanent members refrain from exercising it.
Diffusion	15	25/26	26	Under 26

Note 1: The G4 expressed support for Africa's position in a joint press statement at the September 2021 G4 Foreign Ministers' Meeting.

Note 2: Countries comprising each group; G4 – Japan, Germany, India, Brazil; Africa – 54 African countries; UFC – 12 countries, South Korea, Pakistan, Türkiye, Italy, Spain, Malta, San Marino, Canada, Mexico, Costa Rica, Columbia, Argentina

Source: Website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan

may further retreat if Trump becomes president).

3) Since the G4 proposal favors certain countries, it is unlikely to win majority support by two-thirds of the member countries. We should aim to create a “semi-permanent member” or “long-term member” of the Council, which is considered to have less opposition.

4) Promptly implement feasible reforms to prepare for the next crisis in the international community ⇒ (shift to the Security Council's two-step reform theory described below)

5) Prevention of abuse of the veto must be achieved in any form.

Under the circumstances of wars involving permanent members of the UN Security Council in Ukraine and Gaza, it is unlikely that Russia and China, let alone the US, the United Kingdom, and France, would agree to the proposed expansion of the permanent members of the Council, much less agree to the permanent status of Japan and Germany. There seems to be no prospect of such a charter amendment proposal winning a two-thirds majority of the UN member states (even if the General Assembly resolution were to be adopted, China and Russia would ultimately veto it at the stage of ratification of the charter amendment proposal). While leaving the G4 as an option that cannot be taken immediately, Japan will have to prepare a negotiating strategy to move to Plan B in order to soft land on another option for Security Council enlargement (including the creation of a semi-permanent or long-term member) that the P5 and the majority of the Global South cannot oppose.

Specifically, it would have to be an intermediate response that stops short of the G4 and UFC proposals. This intermediate option (Option B in the 1995 Kofi Annan Report) may provide room for negotiation with the UFC and P5, which are opposed to the

expansion of permanent membership of the Council. With this option, it is recommended for Japan to pursue the creation of an elected semi-permanent (or long-term) Council seat (term of office would be four to eight years, with consecutive re-election possible), and the expanded number of countries would be six to eight or more. If they can continue to be elected after their term of office is over, it would be tantamount to a de facto permanent member of the Council.

### Security Council Reform in Two Stages

In the first phase, we will achieve immediate reform through the creation of a semi-permanent or long-term member of the Security Council, giving new life to the Council. The aim should be for agreement on a two-stage reform theory, in which reform regarding permanent membership of the Council will be an issue for 2045 (the 100th anniversary of the UN) and not an immediate issue.

Specific negotiating tactics for the first phase include informal discussions with the UFC to develop a reform plan. At the same time, we will communicate well with the US, UK, and France, and request their cooperation. We also need to persuade India and Brazil, which are likely to oppose the reform within the G4, and to break up the AU, which is sticking to the expansion of the permanent membership of the Council and its veto under the Ezulwini Consensus. Then, as a second-stage goal, it is necessary to work on reform of the permanent members of the Council (expansion, reduction, phasing out, etc.), and to obtain the member countries' agreement on reaching a concrete conclusion by 2045.

## What about Veto?

With regard to the veto, it will be necessary to exercise some restraint in the first stage of reform. It would be good if the P5 as a whole could agree to the voluntary non-use of the veto, which the UK and France announced with the end of the Cold War, but if this cannot be achieved it will be necessary to seek some restraint through a UN General Assembly resolution or other means. What the UN General Assembly should aim to achieve is the following improvement of the working methods of the Security Council and restraint on the use of the veto, which would not require a Charter amendment in consideration of the opposition of the P5.

- ① Consensus that the veto will not be exercised in cases of genocide or war crimes (General Assembly resolution or P5 arrangement).
- ② Regarding the peaceful settlement of disputes, ensuring the fulfillment of the obligation of the Security Council members, who are parties to the conflict, to abstain from voting (Article 27.3 of the Charter). This is the formula agreed to at Yalta through Josef Stalin's concession. Japan should take the initiative by teaming up with like-minded Middle Power countries and the Global South. It would also be beneficial to seek an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice on the issue of interpretation regarding "parties to the conflict".

However, the restrained use of the veto must be done carefully so as not to overstimulate the US, China, and Russia. Even this is not an easy reform, but after witnessing the abuse of the veto in the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, now is the time.

In the event that the UN Security Council is unable to function due to the veto or other reasons, there is a system whereby issues of international peace and security can be referred to the General Assembly. This is made possible by General Assembly Resolution 377 of 1950, known as the "Uniting for Peace Resolution". Based on this, the Emergency Special Session, which is convened by a majority of the General Assembly or by at least nine Security Council members, may be utilized to make recommendations, including military measures, by a two-thirds majority vote. It is necessary to work on strengthening the functions of the General Assembly so that this complementary function already possessed by the UN General Assembly can be flexibly utilized as a full-fledged mechanism when the Security Council is unable to function due to the confrontation between the US, China, and Russia.

## The UN Future Summit & the G20

There are two developments during 2024 that are worth noting in relation to UN reform. The first is the "Future Summit" proposed by Secretary-General Antonio Guterres in his 2021 Report of the Secretary-General (Our Common Agenda), which will be held at the UN General Assembly on Sept. 22 and 23, 2024. The outcome will be a document entitled "Pact for the Future". The president of the General Assembly has appointed the permanent representatives of

Germany and Namibia to co-facilitate the work among member states on the preamble and the outcome document, which will consist of five chapters on sustainable development, international peace and security, and global governance reform. In this global governance reform, though proposals are to be made on reforms of the Security Council, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council as well as international financial institutions, the zero-based draft of the Agreement released on Jan. 29, 2024 does not include any proposals for reform of the Security Council, and the co-facilitators will present their recommendations in June 2024.<sup>7</sup> It is difficult to predict what this will look like, but this part of the agreement is the biggest challenge and is expected to be a tough negotiation.

The second is the G20 Summit, which Brazil chairs in 2024. Brazil has identified (1) combating hunger, poverty, and social inequality, (2) sustainable development in the economy, society, and environment, and (3) global governance reform, as its priorities, with particular emphasis on (3) reform of the paralyzed Security Council and international financial institutions. Based on the UN Future Summit, the G20 Summit will be held in Brazil in November, and it is believed that Brazil is trying to take the lead in global governance reform, including the Security Council, as a leader of the Global South. The G20 will be presided over in 2023 (India), 2024 (Brazil), and 2025 (South Africa) by the leaders of the Global South, BRICS, and IBSA (India, Brazil, and South Africa), and it is expected that Security Council reform and international financial institution reform will be led by the Global South for the time being. Japan needs to seriously consider how to make the most of these developments in the Global South in its diplomacy.

## Conclusion: Paradigm Shift in Japanese Diplomacy

Due to population decline and sluggish economic growth, Japan has fallen to the fourth-largest economy, surpassed by Germany in 2023; it is projected to be overtaken by India in 2025 and to fall to middle power status in the 2030s. Japan has always been ambivalent about whether it is a great power or not. If we hesitate to call Japan a middle power in the current situation, we can call it a "global middle power". In light of the limited status of Japan's national power, it is necessary to shed the illusion of great power and conduct down-to-earth diplomacy.

As a representative global middle power, Japan should actively cooperate with other middle powers and countries of the Global South to contribute to the peaceful resolution of disputes and the maintenance of international order, and to promote dialogue and cooperation among countries with diverse cultures and values. The same applies to Security Council reform. Japan must break away from the big-power aspirations represented by the G4 proposal and make a drastic change in direction to a global middle power diplomacy that generates change from below through cooperation with smaller countries and the Global South. In this sense, Japan



also needs diplomatic reforms.

Japan's voice in the world will be diminished compared to the past. To compensate for this, Japan must continue its alliance with the US, while at the same time engaging in *entente* with China and neighboring countries, and actively utilizing the UN and international organizations as part of multilateral diplomacy. Regarding UN diplomacy, it is essential to formulate a long-term foreign policy in view of the 100th anniversary of the UN (2045), and the development and utilization of intellectual, material, financial, and human diplomatic assets should be discussed in this context. What Japan does not have is this kind of long-term national interest calculation.

From now on, too, Japan's national interest must not be a closed national interest. We must pursue national interests that are open, fair, and accountable. In pursuit of open national interests, Japan will exercise wisdom and leadership in solving global problems. Since Japan's economic power is limited, we must cultivate and utilize our human assets from now on. Specifically, the current plan to increase the number of Japanese personnel working in UN organizations to 1,000 by 2025 should be doubled at once to 2,000 by 2035. This would be a commitment to the survival of the UN and international organizations, and at the same time, it would mean that Japan would make better use of the UN. If more Japanese with less political bias become heads of UN agencies, the UN will regain its original role as a coordinating body among member states, with impartiality as its principle, rather than being biased toward the West or dominated by China, which will be beneficial to the future of international organizations. We must make a paradigm shift in this way.

The responsibility of the member states supporting the UN, especially the democratic countries including Japan that advocate freedom, human rights, and the rule of law, is grave, and now is the time for the UN agencies embodying the UN Charter to devote their personnel to fulfill their original mission. There is no universal organization that can replace the UN. We recognize that Japan and other like-minded nations have a major role to play in seeking its improvement and continuing to urge change, and in making the UN an organization that will endure for 100 years or longer.

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- 2 UN Secretary General Guterres' speech to the UN General Assembly on Feb. 7, 2024.
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- 4 Michel Pillsbury, "The Hundred-Year Marathon" (Japanese

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- 5 For more on the diplomatic battles over the 2005 Security Council reforms, see "Academia and Politics: New Openings and Advancement," by Shinichi Kitaoka, serialized in the February and March 2024 issues of *Chuo Koron* (in Japanese).
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