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United Nations Security Council veto power

The **United Nations Security Council "veto power"** refers to the power of the five **permanent members of the UN Security Council** to veto any "substantive" resolution. However, a permanent member's **abstention** or absence does not prevent a draft resolution from being adopted. This veto power does not apply to "procedural" votes, as determined by the permanent members themselves. A permanent member can also block the **selection of a Secretary-General**, although a formal veto is unnecessary since the vote is taken behind closed doors.

The veto power is controversial. **Supporters regard it as a promoter of international stability,^[1] a check against military interventions,^[2] and a critical safeguard against U.S. domination.^[3] Critics say that the veto is the most undemocratic element of the UN,^[4] as well as the main cause of inaction on **war crimes and crimes against humanity.^[5]****

UN Charter^[edit]

The veto power originates in Article 27 of the [United Nations Charter](#), which states:

1. Each member of the Security Council shall have a vote.
2. **Decisions of the Security Council on procedural matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of five members.**
3. Decisions of the Security Council on all other matters shall be made by an affirmative vote of nine members including the concurring votes of the permanent members; provided that, in decisions under Chapter VI, and under paragraph 3 of Article 52, a party to a dispute shall abstain from voting.^[6]

A negative vote from any of the permanent members will block the adoption of a draft resolution. However, a permanent member that abstains or is absent from the vote will not block a resolution from being passed.

Although the "power of veto" is not mentioned by name in the UN Charter, Article 27 requires concurring votes from the permanent members. For this reason, the "power of veto" is also referred to as the principle of "**great power unanimity**" and the veto itself is sometimes referred to as the "great power veto".^[7]

Origins^[edit]

The idea of **countries having a veto over the actions of international organisations** was not new in 1945. In the [League of Nations](#), every member of the League Council had a veto on any non-procedural issue.^[8] At the foundation of the League, there were 4 permanent and 4 non-permanent members. The League Council had expanded by 1936 to have 4 permanent and 11 non-permanent members, which meant that there were 15 countries with veto power. The existence of such a large number of vetoes made it very difficult for the League to agree on many issues.

The veto was the result of extensive discussion during the negotiations for the formation of the United Nations at [Dumbarton Oaks](#) (August–October 1944) and [Yalta](#) (February 1945).^[9] The evidence is that the **United States, Soviet Union, United Kingdom, and China** all favored the principle of unanimity, not only out of desire for the major powers to act together, but also to protect their own sovereign rights and national

interests.^[10] [Harry S. Truman](#), who became [President of the US](#) in April 1945, wrote: "All our experts, civil and military, favored it, and without such a veto no arrangement would have passed the Senate."^[11]

At San Francisco, [the Big Five](#) made it clear that there would be no United Nations if they weren't given the veto. [Francis O. Wilcox](#), an adviser to the US delegation, described the dramatic negotiations: "At San Francisco, the issue was made crystal clear by the leaders of the Big Five: it was either the Charter with the veto or no Charter at all. Senator Connally [from the US delegation] dramatically tore up a copy of the Charter during one of his speeches and reminded the small states that they would be guilty of that same if they opposed the unanimity principle. "You may, if you wish," he said, "go home from this Conference and say that you have defeated the veto. But what will be your answer when you are asked: 'Where is the Charter?'"^[4]

Usage of the veto^[edit]

History

The usage of the veto has gone through several distinct phases, reflecting the shifting political balance on the Security Council. From 1946 to 1969, a majority of the Security Council was aligned with the [United States](#), which cast no vetoes because it won every vote. To block resolutions from the Western majority, the [Soviet Union](#) cast 93% of all the vetoes. [France](#) and the [United Kingdom](#) occasionally used the veto to protect their colonial interests, and the [Republic of China](#) only used the veto once.

The Western majority eroded through the 1960s as [decolonization](#) expanded the membership of the United Nations. The newly independent countries of the [Third World](#) frequently voted against the Western powers, which led the United States to resort to the veto.^[13] After the first United States veto in 1970, the Soviet ambassador declared, "Using your automatic majority you imposed your will on others and forced it down their throats. But times have now changed."^{[14]:118} From 1970 to 1991, The United States cast 56% of the vetoes, sometimes joined by French and British vetoes. The Soviet Union cast fewer vetoes than any of the Western powers, and the People's Republic of China used the veto only once.

After the end of the [Cold War](#), there was a brief period of harmony on the Security Council. The period from 31 May 1990 to 11 May 1993 was the longest period in the history of the UN without the use of the veto. The number of resolutions passed each year also increased.^[15] Usage of the veto picked up in the early 21st century, most notably due to the [Syrian Civil War](#). Since 1992, Russia has been the most frequent user of the veto, followed by the United States and China. France and the United Kingdom have not used the veto since 1989.

Subjects^[edit]

See also: [List of vetoed United Nations Security Council resolutions](#)

Secretary-General selection^[edit]

Main article: [United Nations Secretary-General selection](#)

The Secretary-General of the United Nations is appointed by the General Assembly on the recommendation of the Security Council. Therefore, the veto power can be used to block the selection of a Secretary-General.^[16] Since 1981, the Security Council has selected the Secretary-General through series of [straw polls](#). A vote by a permanent member to "discourage" a candidate is considered equivalent to a veto. The formal recommendation of a Secretary-General is approved unanimously by [acclamation](#). Although the identity of the vetoing permanent member is usually known, the veto does not go on the record as a formal veto of a Security Council Resolution.

Every permanent member has vetoed at least one candidate for Secretary-General. The United States circumvented a Soviet veto in 1950 by asking the General Assembly to extend [Trygve Lie](#)'s term without a recommendation from the Security Council.^[17] However, every Secretary-General since 1953 has been recommended by a unanimous vote of the permanent members of the Security Council.

Analysis by country^[edit]

China (ROC/PRC)^[edit]

See also: *[China and the United Nations](#)*

Between 1946 and 1971, the Chinese seat on the Security Council was held by the [Republic of China](#), whose Nationalist government lost the [Chinese Civil War](#) in 1949 and evacuated to Taiwan. During that time, its representative used the veto only once to block [Mongolia](#)'s application for membership in 1955, because the ROC considered the entirety of Mongolia to be part of China. This postponed the admission of Mongolia [until 1961](#), when the Soviet Union announced that it would block all further admissions of new members unless Mongolia were admitted. Faced with this pressure, the Republic of China relented under protest.

In 1971, the Republic of China was expelled from the United Nations, and the Chinese seat was transferred to the [People's Republic of China](#). China first used the veto on 25 August 1972 to block [Bangladesh](#)'s admission to the United Nations. From 1971 to 2011, China used its veto sparingly, preferring to abstain rather than veto resolutions not directly related to Chinese interests.^[18] China turned abstention into an "art form," abstaining on 30% of Security Council Resolutions between 1971 and 1976.^{[14]:140} Since the outbreak of the [Syrian Civil War](#) in 2011, China has joined Russia in many double-vetoes. China has not cast a lone veto since 1999.

Soviet Union/Russia^[edit]

See also: *[Soviet Union and the United Nations](#)* and *[Russia and the United Nations](#)*

In the early days of the United Nations, the Soviet Union was responsible for almost all of the vetoes. Because of their frequent vetoes, Soviet ambassador [Andrei Gromyko](#) earned the nickname **Mr. Nyet** and [Vyacheslav Molotov](#) was known as **Mr. Veto**.^{[19][20]} Molotov regularly vetoed the admission of new members to counter the US refusal to admit members of the [Eastern Bloc](#). The impasse was finally resolved on 14 December 1955 when 16 countries from the Western and Eastern Blocs were simultaneously admitted to the UN.^[21]

The Soviet government adopted an "empty chair" policy at the Security Council in January 1950 to protest the fact that the Republic of China still held the Chinese seat at the United Nations.^[22] The Soviet Union was not present in the Security Council to veto UN Security Council Resolutions 83 (27 June 1950) and 84 (7 July 1950), authorising assistance to South Korea in the [Korean War](#).^[23] The Soviet Union returned to the Security Council in August 1950 and resumed its usage of the veto.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation used its veto power sparingly. However, Russian vetoes became more common in the early 21st century to block resolutions on conflicts with Russian military involvement, including [Georgia](#), [Syria](#) and [Ukraine](#).^[24]

France^[edit]

See also: *[France and the United Nations](#)*

France uses its veto power sparingly. The last time it unilaterally vetoed a draft was in 1976 to block a resolution on the question of the independence of the [Comoros](#), which was done to keep the island of [Mayotte](#) as a French overseas community.^[25] It also vetoed, along with U.K, a resolution calling on the immediate cessation of military action by the Israeli army against Egypt in 1956 during the [Suez Crisis](#).^[25] France has not used the veto since 1989, when it joined the United States and United Kingdom to veto a resolution condemning the [United States invasion of Panama](#).^[25] In 2003, the threat of a French veto on [resolution](#) on the impending [invasion of Iraq](#) caused friction between France and the United States.^[20]

United Kingdom^[edit]

See also: *[United Kingdom and the United Nations](#)*

The United Kingdom has used its Security Council veto power on 32 occasions.^[26] The first occurrence was in October 1956 when the United Kingdom and France vetoed a letter from the USA to the President of the

Security Council concerning Palestine. The most recent was in December 1989 when the United Kingdom, France and the United States vetoed a draft resolution condemning the [United States invasion of Panama](#).^[24]

The United Kingdom used its veto power, along with France, to veto a draft resolution aimed at resolving the [Suez Canal crisis](#) (in which France and UK were militarily involved) in 1956. The UK and France eventually withdrew from Egypt after the U.S. instigated an 'emergency special session' of the General Assembly, under the terms of the "[Uniting for Peace](#)" resolution, which led to the establishment of the [United Nations Emergency Force I](#) (UNEF I), by the adoption of Assembly resolution 1001.^[27] The UK also used its veto seven times in relation to [Rhodesia](#) from 1963 to 1973, five of these occasions were unilateral; the only occasions on which the UK has used its veto power unilaterally.^[24] The UK has not used the veto since 1989, when it joined the United States and France to veto a resolution condemning the [United States invasion of Panama](#).

United States^[edit]

See also: [United States and the United Nations](#)

Ambassador [Charles W. Yost](#) cast the first U.S. veto in 1970 over [Rhodesia](#), and the U.S. cast a lone veto in 1972 to block a resolution that condemned Israel for war against Syria and Lebanon. Since then, the United States has been the most frequent user of the veto power, mainly on resolutions criticising and condemning Israel; since 2002, the United States has applied the [Negroponte doctrine](#) to veto most resolutions relating to the ongoing [Israel-Palestinian conflict](#). This has been a constant cause of friction between the [General Assembly](#) and the Security Council. On 23 December 2016, the [Obama](#) administration abstained on a [resolution](#) calling for an end to [Israeli settlements](#), the first time that the United States has.^[28] However, the United States has resumed the use of the veto in the [Trump administration](#).^[29]

Controversy^[edit]

Criticism^[edit]

The veto power has been criticized for its undemocratic nature. A single country can prevent a majority of the Security Council from taking any action. For example, the United States routinely casts lone vetoes of resolutions criticizing [Israel](#).^[30] The permanent members also veto resolutions that criticize their own actions. In 2014, Russia vetoed a resolution condemning its [annexation of Crimea](#). [Amnesty International](#) claimed that the five permanent members had used their veto to "promote their political self interest or geopolitical interest above the interest of protecting civilians."^[31]

Some critics see the fact that veto power exclusive to the permanent five as being anachronistic, unjust, or counterproductive. Peter Nadin writes that "The veto is an anachronism ... In the twenty-first century, the veto has come to be almost universally seen as a disproportionate power and an impediment to credible international action to crises."^[32] The "enormous influence of the veto power" has been cited as a cause of the UN's ineffectiveness in preventing and responding to [genocide](#), violence, and human rights violations.^[33] Various countries outside the P5, such as the [Non-Aligned Movement](#) and [African Union](#) have proposed limitations on the veto power.^[34] Reform of the veto power is often included in proposals for [reforming the Security Council](#).

It has been argued that with the adoption of the "[Uniting for Peace](#)" resolution by the General Assembly, and given the interpretations of the Assembly's powers that became [customary international law](#) as a result, that the Security Council "power of veto" problem could be surmounted.^[35] By adopting A/RES/377 A, on 3 November 1950, over two-thirds of UN Member states declared that, according to the UN Charter, the permanent members of the UNSC cannot and should not prevent the UNGA from taking any and all action necessary to restore international peace and security, in cases where the UNSC has failed to exercise its "primary responsibility" for maintaining peace. Such an interpretation sees the UNGA as being awarded "final responsibility"—rather than "secondary responsibility"—for matters of international peace and security, by the UN Charter. Various official and semi-official UN reports make explicit reference to the Uniting for Peace resolution as providing a mechanism for the UNGA to overrule any UNSC vetoes,^{[36][37][38][39]} thus

rendering them little more than delays in UN action, should two-thirds of the Assembly subsequently agree that action is necessary.

Support[\[edit\]](#)

Supporters regard the veto as an important safeguard in international relations. [Thomas G. Weiss](#) and Giovanna Kuele called it "a variation on the [Hippocratic Oath](#): UN decisions should do no harm."^[40] Russian President Vladimir Putin praised the "profound wisdom" of the founders of the United Nations, referring to the veto power as the underpinning of international stability.^[1] Chinese Foreign Minister [Wang Yi](#) lauded its "important role in checking the instinct of war."^[2]