

AFRICA POLICY BRIEF

Why Africa Deserves a Permanent Seat on United Nations Security Council.

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“In particular, we continue to witness [historic unjust under-representation](#) of Africa, which was still ruled by colonial powers when the United Nations came into existence and the Security Council established. And you have had so many powerful speeches from an African that wants to be an Africa that can be humane. I think that Africans must be allowed to have a fair say in Council decisions affecting their own continent.”

Extract from Irish President, His Excellency, Michael D. Higgins’ Speech of 2019 to United Nations General Assembly.

When United Nations (UN) was founded in October 1945, only four African countries were part of this organization. Today, all 54 countries are member states of the UN. Of the 193 member states, only China, France, Russia, United Kingdom and the United States of America (USA) are the only permanent members of United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the organization’s highest decision-making body. This gives them more powers ([veto](#)) than the rest of all UN member states when it comes to decision making in the council, including the entire African.

The irony is that Africa, whose membership at UN is nearly 28% of organization’s total membership plays no key role despite being central in council’s work. For example, in 2018, more than 50% of UNSC meetings, 60% of its official documents and 70% of resolutions contained in [Chapter VII Mandates](#) all largely focused on Africa.

While Africa is represented on the UNSC by the so-called A3 – a block of three elected African states on UNSC, these countries have no big say since none has veto power as opposed to the other five states with permanent membership. With unity of African states through their body, African Union (AU), the role of Africa in Global affairs cannot be underestimated.

This can be attributed to [closer relationship](#) of African Countries with United Nations. This makes the continent more relevant and arguably, the reasons why it should have a permanent seat at UNSC to take part in discussing issues that directly and indirectly impact its interest(s).

Indeed, during this year's UN general assembly which also marked 75 years of UN's existence, almost one after the other, several African leaders repeated their calls asking for Africa to be granted permanent seat(s) on UN's Security Council. [South Africa's President](#) 'who is also the current president of the African Union (AU), Cyril Ramaphosa noted that "...we repeat our call for greater representation of African countries on Security council, and that this be taken up with urgency at Intergovernmental Negotiations," stressing that "It is only through a reformed and inclusive UN Security Council that we will be able to collectively resolve some of the world's most protracted conflicts." While Nigeria's [president Muhammadu Buhari](#) re-emphasized that "Nigeria supports expansion of the UNSC to reflect the diversity and dynamics of the 21st century. Africa deserves permanent seats in the UNSC." The same message was also voiced by several other African leaders including [Ghana's president](#), Nana Akufo Addo who stressed that to fit the 21st century challenges, UNSC must be reformed to allow African countries representation with a permanent seat.

Why is a Permanent seat on the UNSC important for Africa?

For the last 75 years, UNSC has been making decisions that directly or indirectly affect Africa but [without meaningful input](#) from African states. In many ways, issues of the African continent with its 54 countries which are members of UN have not received much attention from UNSC when compared for example with peace in Middle East, and other non-African countries like North Korea. For example, files of UN peacekeeping operations that involve African States show less involvement of Africa and at best are never contentious during the council's deliberations as often decisions are taken by the UNSC permanent members without Africa's input.

Also, a closer analysis shows how African issues such as [Central Africa Republic](#) and [Libyan Crisis](#) attracted intense discussions at security council. The Libyan crisis in particular saw some UNSC permanent members taking sides with [Russia](#) and [France](#) backing warlord General Khalifa Haftar's forces against Libya's UN reorganized government in Tripoli. Other UNSC permanent member states such as USA and China have also been accused of backing their allies involved in this crisis largely due to selfish strategic interests.

All this shows a clear indication how selfish and strategic interests influence some UNSC members states with permanent positions on the council while making important decisions that affect African countries' interests.

As other permanent members of UNSC push their agendas, Africa's agenda is usually ignored. For example, after the overthrow of Sudan's dictator Omar al-Bashir by the army, working on request of African Union, the three countries representing AU at (on rotating basis) or the A3 (at the time were Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa) urged the five permanent members of UNSC to support AU's demand for a quick transition to civilian rule but this call failed [because China and Russia](#) who enjoy good relations with the army in Sudan objected to this idea. This prompted A3 to issue a statement aligning themselves with AU's position and stressing the need for quick transition to civilian rule in Sudan.

The developments above are a clear indication that UNSC favors permanent members' views more than those of and the African Continent hence, the need for the continent to have a permanent seat at the UNSC. UNSC's [failure to respect](#) Africa's views and efforts of asserting the continent's capacity to address their challenges makes the continent's representation at the council a mere formality and as such, inconsequential.

Going by the famous Ezulwini Consensus which was supported and adopted by all African Union Foreign Ministers and presented to United Nations as AU's demand for reforms in UN, it is evident that permanent representation of Africa presents enormous benefits for the continent. Indeed, the [Ezulwini Consensus](#) notes that "Africa's goal is to be fully

represented in all the decision-making organs of the UN, particularly in the Security Council, which is the principal decision-making organ of the UN in matters relating to international peace and security."

For peace to prevail in Africa, positions taken by UNSC will play a role. However, decisions taken by the Security Council must fully represent views and interests of African countries and Africa must have a say than the case at the moment where the permanent member(s) have a greater say to the extent of rejecting or vetoing Africa's position while addressing challenges the continent is facing as was the case while responding to Sudan crisis in 2019 when Russia and China used their positions at UNSC to reject AU's Position on the crisis in what many saw as a clear case of the two countries putting their interests ahead of Africa's

Upon that background, it is evident that Africa having a permanent seat at UNSC cannot be gainsaid. However, having a permanent seat at UNSC alone may not be the magic bullet to singly address Africa's Challenges. A permanent seat can help Africa in solving the continent's challenges only if there is unity and a clearly defined goal(s). The current representation of Africa at UN where the continent is represented by three states is done on rotational basis. This means that the three members representing African bloc are changed every two years and hence, the new members that take over from the former may not guarantee continuity since

UN resolutions sometimes are driven by lobbying and politics which often are influenced by geo-political conflicts and selfish interests of powerful council members and their allies. Such divisions especially among UNSC's permanent members by extension have negative implications when it comes to effectiveness and unity of A3 and entire council.

In scenarios where individual African countries' governments, the continent's regional groups or blocs and Peace and Security Council (PSC) find themselves without a common position A3 countries find themselves in a tight position and must be strategic and ensure they navigate key issues such as national, sometimes regional and continental verses global interest which often are opposite.

The other issue is that PSC which is charged with enforcing of AU's decisions when compared with UNSC the [two bodies have different mandates](#), and in a broad sense serve different masters with different geopolitical interests. Indeed, the UNSC has on different occasions rejected PSC positions while discussing issues affecting the continent. For example, [UNSC rejected PSC's pleas](#) to appoint a joint African Union – United Nations envoy to Libya, clear evidence that even on issues directly affecting Africa, the continent's representatives at UNSC barely have any power to influence decisions other than being just participants. Accordingly, A3 countries, arguably, have no real capacity to influence the stand of UNSC permanent member.

Africa's calls for a permanent seat at the UNSC are now louder than ever before, with support from several UN member countries including non-African countries. For example, in his 2019 address to the UN general assembly, the president of Ireland, Michael D. Higgins called for reforms at UNSC and an end of under-representation of UN Member-states stressing that the current UNSC supports "[historic unjust under-representation](#)", adding that Africans must be fully represented on UNSC; "In particular, we continue to witness an historic unjust under-representation of Africa, which was still ruled by colonial powers when the United Nations came into existence and the Security Council established. And you have heard so many powerful speeches from an African that wants to be humane. I think that Africans must be allowed to have a fair say in Council decisions affecting their own continent."

In conclusion therefore, Africa has legitimate reasons to demand for a permanent seat(s) on UNSC. However, since the inception of the UNSC, its permanent members enjoy comfortable status with their veto powers that they would arguably do everything within their means – politically and diplomatically to maintain the Status quo. However, history shows that when African countries unite and speak in unison, their demands are heard.

With the continent's numerical strength in terms of membership at UN, the Continent's membership gives UN

credibility and therefore, Africa's demands for a permanent seat(s) cannot be ignored. As was the case when China and Russia decided to use their veto powers in Security Council to disregard AU's position in the crisis in Sudan, Africa's A3 countries were united and acted swiftly and stood firm in supporting PSC position which represented AU's position. Though it may not be easy, African leaders working together and seeking support from other non-permanent members at Security council may see their demands for a permanent seat succeed. Indeed, it is not only Africa calling for reforms at UNSC. India, Brazil, and Germany among others are also demanding for a reformed UN, therefore, Africa can may decide to seek their support in demanding for a permanent seat and in the near future reciprocate.

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