**[Vetoing peace](https://www.dawn.com/news/1798801/vetoing-peace)**

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THE UN General Assembly [convened](https://www.dawn.com/news/1797426) again on Dec 12 when Israel’s war on Gaza had already claimed 18,000 Palestinian lives and caused a humanitarian catastrophe of epic proportions.

The GA adopted a resolution calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire by an overwhelming majority — over three-quarters of member states, leaving the US and Israel isolated in the world body. This followed on the heels of the [veto](https://www.dawn.com/news/1796392) exercised by the US in the Security Council (SC) to block a similar ceasefire resolution.

It was the second time the [US vetoed a ceasefire](https://www.dawn.com/news/1796392) that could have brought an end to hostilities in Gaza and to Israel’s genocidal military campaign. In October, the US did the same, which was also followed by an extraordinary GA session requested by Arab and OIC countries.

Then too, the GA voted by a decisive majority to demand a humanitarian truce. Both GA resolutions were a clear reflection of world opinion. They were also designed to mount diplomatic pressure on Washington to relent on its opposition to a ceasefire and blind support for Israel. But that didn’t happen.

As GA resolutions are non-binding and cannot override a veto, they could do nothing to stop the war. This meant Israel’s brutal bombardment continued to lay waste to Gaza and claim more lives.

The veto then has stood between war and peace. This has brought veto power into sharper public focus and reignited the debate about why the world’s premier body responsible for maintenance of international peace and security fails to fulfil its obligations when expected to act.

The veto enables the five permanent members of the Security Council who possess it to take unilateral actions to prevent resolutions they deem to be against their interests as well as protect their allies. This results in the Council’s paralysis. Failure to take action in times of war, crisis and mass atrocities denudes the Council of legitimacy and the UN too of credibility. The veto is arguably the UN Charter’s most anachronistic and controversial provision that makes the P5 unaccountable.

The Security Council’s paralysis denudes it of legitimacy and the UN of credibilit

The Security Council structure along with veto power were the product of the historical arrangement reached over 75 years ago by the victors of World War II. Veto power was bestowed on permanent members as a compromise to elicit agreement by the major powers on the establishment of the UN and their cooperation with it.

Ostensibly designed to ensure ‘peaceful relations’ between big powers it also aimed to insulate them from a decision against any of them. This was regarded by the wider membership as a ‘necessary price’ to pay for big powers’ support for the world body.

The P5’s privileged position was nonetheless questioned even at the UN’s inception but much more so in subsequent years as frustration grew with the Council’s ineffectiveness in the face of conflicts and international crises. Calls for reform also became louder with changing global realities as the Council was seen to reflect the power relations of a bygone era.

The first significant effort by the GA to respond to the Council’s paralysis came in 1950 with the adoption of the Uniting for Peace resolution (377), which provided that the GA could consider and make recommendations on a matter relating to the maintenance of peace and security if the Security Council failed to act. The two GA sessions on Gaza in October and December 2023 were convened by invoking this resolution.

Growing calls for SC reform led to the creation in 2009 of the intergovernmental negotiations process. Talks have been going on for over two decades in informal GA sessions with the aim of achieving comprehensive SC reform that addresses five interlinked issues, including categories of membership, question of veto and size of an expanded Council.

There is general agreement among countries on reform to reflect 21st-century realities and democratic principles to make the Council more representative and accountable. But consensus has been elusive on how to accomplish this — with no solution in sight. The question of the veto continues to be a source of intense contention.

The principal disagreement, mainly responsible for lack of progress in negotiations, is between countries that aspire for permanent seats for themselves and others who oppose this and propose enlarging the Council by adding more elected, non-permanent members. This has put the so-called G4 — Germany, Japan, India and Brazil — at odds with the Uniting for Consensus countries led by Italy and including Pakistan, Argentina, Mexico, Republic of Korea, Canada and other like-minded states.

The UFC argues that the Council’s frequent deadlock and paralysis is due to discord and clashing interests of the P5, which prevents it from playing the role expected of it and enjoined by the Charter. Adding more permanent members with veto powers will only compound this dysfunction, not end it. UFC members also regard the veto as contrary to the democratic principle of the sovereign equality of states.

Reform discussions on the veto have seen a confusing array of proposals ranging from adding more permanent members with veto, without veto; with deferred veto or committed to voluntary restraint; a veto exercised in a national capacity or on behalf of a region; an unconditional veto and one subject to periodic review.

Given the impasse in these negotiations some countries have meanwhile offered proposals to limit the use of veto in specific contexts. In 2013, France proposed voluntary restraint on the use of veto; a French-Mexican proposal urges voluntary suspension of the veto in situations of mass atrocities.

A European proposal suggested restricting the veto in humanitarian cases. These have remained unimplemented proposals. An important move to make veto-holders accountable came last year with the GA’s adoption of a resolution, which requires the P5 to explain and justify their use of veto. This provides for the GA to be convened within 10 days after a veto to debate the situation. The first such debate was held in April this year.

While these efforts are important, they have not dissuaded the two countries — US and Russia — who have used the veto most frequently over the decades from continuing to do so. The grave consequences of this are being witnessed today in the killing fields of Gaza, where peace has been vetoed.

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