

Is UN Security Council Reform Possible? A Problem-Based Learning Simulation

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Is United Nations Security Council reform possible? On paper, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the most powerful international organization ever constructed; however, in practice, the UNSC has consistently failed to address the very international security and human rights crises it was designed to prevent. These failures, coupled with the unequal power discrepancies the five permanent members (P5) of the UNSC hold, have led to nearly all UN member nations calling for some type of UNSC reform. However, despite nearly universal support for reform, no reforms to the UNSC have occurred since 1965, and there is little hope for meaningful change in the future. This can be complexing and frustrating for students learning about the United Nations. Moreover, students are often unaware of the perspectives non-American nations have about the United Nations and the frustration other countries have over the outsized influence the U.S. has as a permanent member of the UNSC. Therefore, I developed this original problem-based learning simulation designed to help students better understand 1) Why it is so difficult (if not impossible) to reform the United Nations Security Council, 2) The perspectives different nations have about the UNSC, and 3) The strategies and coalitions nations have developed in their attempts to reform the UNSC and limit the influence of the P5. In this problem-based learning simulation, students in small groups are randomly assigned to different countries, each with its own goals and level of power (strong military, robust economy, veto power in the UNSC, etc.). Students role-playing as their assigned country are then tasked with reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To accomplish this, students must negotiate with other nations (students) and use the resources and influence of their country to achieve their assigned nation's goals (not all of which are strictly related to UNSC reform). By role-playing as a nation and working with other students to solve a real-world problem, students graduate from simply memorizing facts. Instead, they are forced to think critically and analytically, leading to deeper insight. By the end of the simulation, students better understand why UNSC reform is so difficult to achieve, the perspectives different nations have concerning the UN, and how a country's self-interest can often thwart meaningful global change. Anonymous student evaluations and results from a pre-and-posttest on the material provide evidence that the simulation is an engaging and effective way to teach undergraduate students the complexities of the UNSC.

Introduction

“Why did the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) do nothing to stop this?” When teaching international relations courses, I am inevitably asked this question when students learn about past or current atrocities or conflicts. Understandably, students want to know why the one international organization with the authority and mandate to stop these atrocities and/or conflicts from happening, never seems to do so. Unfortunately, the most common and simplest answer to this question, one (or more) of the permanent five (P5) members used their veto power to stop the UNSC from acting, is not only unsatisfying for students but lacks the political and diplomatic nuances involved in international relations. Furthermore, this answer often leads students to ask, “Why doesn’t the UNSC just get rid of the veto?” The answer to this question, the P5 can block any efforts to remove their veto power, is again unsatisfying to students and lacks the nuances surrounding UNSC reform efforts.

Therefore, I developed this original problem-based learning simulation designed to help students better understand 1) Why it is so difficult (if not impossible) to reform the United Nations Security Council, 2) The perspectives different nations have about the UNSC, and 3) The strategies and coalitions nations have developed in their attempts to reform the UNSC and limit the influence of the P5. In this problem-based learning simulation, students in small groups are randomly assigned to different countries, each with its own goals and level of power (strong military, robust economy, veto power in the UNSC, etc.). Students role-playing as their assigned country are then tasked with reforming the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). To accomplish this, students must negotiate with other nations (students) and use the resources and influence of their country to achieve their assigned nation's goals (not all of which are strictly related to UNSC reform). By role-playing as a nation and working with other students to solve a

real-world problem, students graduate from simply memorizing facts. Instead, they are forced to think critically and analytically, leading to a deeper level of insight. By the end of the simulation, students better understand why UNSC reform is so difficult to achieve, the perspectives different nations have concerning the UN, and how a country's self-interest can often thwart meaningful global change. Anonymous student evaluations and results from a pre-and-posttest on the material provide evidence that the simulation is an engaging and effective way to teach undergraduate students the complexities of the UNSC.

To assess the effectiveness of the activity, I rely on an anonymous student survey and a pre-post design. The survey results indicate that the vast majority of students strongly agreed that the activity was enjoyable (84%), helpful (81%), and should be used in future classes (90%). When asked about the effectiveness of the activity on their learning, an overwhelming majority of students strongly agreed that the activity helped them better understand why UNSC reform is so difficult to achieve (89%), what actors are standing in the way of reform (93%), and why P5 countries use their veto power (88%). Results from the pre-posttest reveal that students report substantively large and statistically significant increases in their understanding of the actors and key issues involved in UNSC reform efforts. Overall, these results are quite generalizable, having a sample size of 83 students across four International Relations courses at Florida State University and Boise State University.

Simulations and Problem-Based Learning

Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of active learning exercises in classrooms. Scholars have indicated that incorporating role-playing games, simulations, films, games, and analogies leads to higher levels of cognitive engagement and enthusiasm for learning

(Baranowski & Weir, 2015; Gorton & Havercroft, 2012; Shapiro & Leopold, 2012) and helps students connect abstract theories and problems to real-world situations (Austin et al., 2006; Baranowski & Weir, 2015; Biziouras, 2013; Gorton & Havercroft, 2012). All these can help students learn and apply difficult concepts and theories, improve student performance on examinations, enhance learning outcomes, and increase student knowledge acquisition and retention (Jones & Bursens, 2015; Krain & Shadle, 2006; Nishikawa & Jaeger, 2011; Powner & Allendoerfer, 2008).

United Nations Security Council Reform

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is charged with maintaining global peace and security. Over the last 70 years, the UNSC has been at the heart of some of the world's most significant events. The UN Charter gives the UNSC the power to authorize multilateral sanctions and military actions and it is the only authority that can make decisions that bind all member states of the United Nations. The UNSC consists of 15 members: five permanent members – the United States, Russia, Great Britain, France, and China – known as the P5 and 10 non-permanent members. The 10 non-permanent members serve a two-year term and always consist of five states from Asia and Africa, one country from Eastern Europe, two nations from Latin America/Caribbean, and two countries from Western Europe, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. To serve on the Security Council a country must first be nominated by their regional caucus and then be approved by two-thirds of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA). Every year, five new non-permanent members are elected to Council and five members leave (states cannot serve consecutive terms). When voting on any matter, a resolution requires the affirmative vote of nine members and the concurring vote (abstention or absence) of the five

permanent members to pass. If a permanent member votes against any resolution, the resolution will not be approved. Therefore, in addition to permanent membership on the Council, the P5 holds unilateral veto power.

Despite on paper being the most powerful international organization ever constructed, the UNSC, in practice, has consistently failed to address the very international security and human rights crises it was designed to prevent (Hurd 2024). These failures largely derive from one of the permanent members using their veto power to block the UNSC from taking action. For example, Russia has vetoed several UNSC resolutions concerning its invasion of Ukraine, the United States has repeatedly vetoed resolutions condemning Israel for its actions in Palestine, and China has vetoed UNSC resolutions against Myanmar for its treatment of the Rohingya. These failures, coupled with the unequal power discrepancies the five permanent members of the UNSC hold, have led to nearly all UN member nations calling for some type of UNSC reform (Hurd 2024, Blum 2005, Hosli & Dörfler 2015).

However, despite near universal support for reforming the UNSC, actual reform has remained elusive. While everyone wants the Security Council to be reformed, no one can agree what those reforms should look like. Moreover, the rules to amend the UN Charter make reform efforts even more daunting. For the UN Charter to be amended two-thirds of the members of the UN General Assembly must vote to adopt the amendment, then if adopted at least two-thirds of all UN member countries and all permanent members of the UNSC must ratify the amendment. This means that not only do all permanent members of the UNSC have to agree, but the vast majority of all UN members must also support any amendment to reform the Security Council.

Learning Objectives

The core learning objectives of this activity are to help students understand how the UNSC operates and the efforts and procedures related to reforming the Security Council. First, this activity shows students why the permanent five on the council use and wish to safeguard their veto power. Second, by having students role-play as countries with varying motives and recourses, the activity illustrates why reforming the UNSC is difficult to achieve. Third, this activity teaches students how to amend the UN Charter and the major actors involved in UNSC reform efforts. Fourth, the activity illustrates the informal agreements, negotiating, and vote buying in the United Nations. Finally, the activity illustrates how and why national self-interest typically trumps global interests and prevents the United Nations from achieving its mandate.

UNSC Reform Simulation

Step 1: Assigning Countries and Coalitions (5 Minutes)

I begin the exercise by assigning students or small groups the country, of a coalition of countries, they will be role-playing as. Each student (or group) is handed a card that tells them 1) Their country (or coalition), 2) their country's (or coalition's) ideal UNSC reform, 3) special rules they must follow, and 4) their country's (or coalition's) political/ economic resources. All the information that students receive can be found in Table 1.

I provide students with their country's ideal reform and special rules they must follow to make the simulation accurately reflect what their country wants/ would do in real life. The ideal reforms all come from statements the country has made about what they would like the UNSC reform to look like. Furthermore, the special rules are also derived from statements countries have made about what they would do in certain situations. For example, the special rule for the

Table 1: Countries/ Coalitions

Country/ Coalition	Ideal Reform	Special Rules	Resources and tools for negotiations
<i>United States</i>	Germany and Japan become permanent members with veto power. Three developing countries become permanent members without veto power.	Must veto any reform that takes away or weakens your veto power	• Veto power in the UNSC. • GDP: 25.4 trillion USD (Rank #1 in the world). • Strongest and most advanced military in the world (Rank #1) • Influence over who gets IMF and World Bank loans.
<i>United Kingdom</i>	Increase the number of permanent and non-permanent members. Veto power for all members should have some restraints.	Must veto any reform that takes away your veto power	• Veto power in the UNSC. • GDP 3.1 trillion USD (Rank #6 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #5)
<i>France</i>	Increase the number of permanent and non-permanent members. Veto power for all members should have some restraints. (Supports India becoming a permanent member)	Must veto any reform that takes away your veto power	• Veto power in the UNSC. • GDP 2.7 trillion USD (Rank #7 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #9)
<i>Russia</i>	Increase the number of permanent and non-permanent members. No changes in veto power. (Supports Brazil and India becoming permanent members without veto power).	Must veto any reform that takes away or weakens Russia's veto power. Must veto any reform that gives Germany a permanent seat.	• Veto power in the UNSC. • GDP 2.2 trillion USD (Rank #8 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #2) • Large oil and natural gas reserves
<i>China</i>	Increase the number of non-permanent members. No veto for new members. (Supports Africa and developing countries having more seats)	Must veto any reform that takes away or weakens China's veto power or gives veto power to any other nation	• Veto power in the UNSC. • GDP 17.96 trillion USD (Rank #2 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #3) • Many countries are dependent on Chinese exports

<i>Group of Four (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan)</i>	All Group of Four countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) and two states from the African Coalition have permanent seats with the same privileges as the current P5 members. Increase the number of non-permanent seats to 14.	Must oppose any reform that benefits countries from the “Coffee Club” coalition more than you	• GDP 14.4 trillion USD (Rank #3 if a country). • Strong Military
<i>Brazil*</i>	All Group of Four countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) and two states from the African Coalition have permanent seats with the same privileges as the current P5 members. Increase the number of non-permanent seats to 14.	Must oppose any reform that benefits countries from the “Coffee Club” coalition more than you	• GDP 2.2 trillion USD (Rank #9 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #12)
<i>Germany*</i>	All Group of Four countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) and two states from the African Coalition have permanent seats with the same privileges as the current P5 members. Increase the number of non-permanent seats to 14.	Must oppose any reform that benefits countries from the “Coffee Club” coalition more than you	• GDP 4.5 trillion USD (Rank #3 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #25)
<i>India*</i>	All Group of Four countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) and two states from the African Coalition have permanent seats with the same privileges as the current P5 members. Increase the number of non-permanent seats to 14.	Must oppose any reform that benefits countries from the “Coffee Club” coalition more than you	• GDP 3.5 trillion USD (Rank #5 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #4)
<i>Japan*</i>	All Group of Four countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) and two states from the African Coalition	Must oppose any reform that benefits countries from the	• GDP 4.2 trillion USD (Rank #4 in the world). • Military strength (Rank #8)

	have permanent seats with the same privileges as the current P5 members. Increase the number of non-permanent seats to 14.	“Coffee Club” coalition more than you	
<i>Uniting for Consensus (UfC) AKA the “Coffee Club”</i>	Increase the number of non-permanent members to 21.	Must oppose any reform that gives the Group of Four countries (Brazil, Germany, India and Japan) permanent membership and veto power	• GDP combined around 12 trillion USD (if a country #3 in the world) • 12 votes in the UNGA
<i>African Union</i>	Two permanent seats for African nations.	In addition to getting seats on the UNSC, your mission is to get as much foreign aid, trade deals, economic support, etc. as you possibly can for countries in the African coalition	• 54 votes in the UNGA
<i>CARICOM</i>	A permanent and/or nonpermanent seat for Latin America and Caribbean Countries	In addition to getting seats on the UNSC, your mission is to get as much foreign aid, trade deals, economic support, etc. as you possibly can for countries in CARICOM	• 15 votes in the UNGA

* Group of 4 Country

group that is assigned to the United States is that they must veto any reform that takes away or weakens their veto power.

A benefit of this activity is that it is designed for classes of varying sizes. I have used the activity in classes as small as 17 and as large as 60. Countries/Coalitions can be assigned to individual students or groups of students. Furthermore, the activity is designed to have 9 or 12 countries/coalitions, depending on class size. For larger classes, the “Group of 4” can be split into individual countries (Germany, Japan, India, Brazil).

Step 2: Strategize/Planning Period (15 Minutes)

Next, I have students strategize and plan how to achieve their goals and get other countries to support their ‘ideal reform.’ To facilitate this, I pass out a worksheet that asks students:

- 1) What does your country (or group of countries) want? What is your ideal reform scenario?
- 2) If you are unable to get your **ideal reform**, what other reforms would you support?
(What reforms would be better for your country (coalition) than the current status quo)
- 3) What kind of reforms should you oppose?
- 4) What can your country (or group of countries) do to **incentivize** or **convince** other countries to support your reform proposals?
- 5) What can your country (or groups of countries) do to **stop** or **prevent** other countries from passing a reform you do not support?
- 6) What countries (or group of countries) should you try to work and ally with to pass a reform you support?

While students answer these questions, instructors can walk around and talk to students about their strategies and answer any questions students may have.

Step 3: Negotiations (15-20 Minutes)

Before I let students start negotiating with each other, I show students a worksheet (see appendix) that they can fill out when they start making agreements with other countries. The worksheet is designed to help students negotiate with their classmates and make deals. After I explain how they can use the worksheet, students start moving around the class and negotiating with each other. This can quickly become very chaotic. I have found passing out name tags with the country they are role-playing as on them to be very helpful. While students negotiate, instructors should walk around the class and ensure all the groups stay on task.

While negotiating with other countries, students can use their economic and military resources in their negotiations. For example, students can promise foreign aid, military alliances, or trade deals to get countries on their side. This “vote buying” will predominately be used by the United States and China. However, Russia, the U.K., France, the G4, and the “coffee club” have sufficient resources to make deals with other countries.

Some countries/ coalitions have fewer resources to buy votes but can still be influential. The African Union and CARICOM use this time to not only try to get other nations to support their ideal reforms to the Security Council but to get as many resources and benefits from power nations as they can. This again matches reality, where nations from the global south, lacking the geo-political influence of the wealthiest nations in the UN, are forced to choose between their own political goals and the potential for massive economic benefits if they side with a major power (Alexander and Rooney, 2019; Houser 2024).

Step 4: Review Proposals and Vote for Reforms (5-10 Minutes)

After students are done negotiating and have made their deals with other countries, the instructor should call for all reform proposals (the worksheet) to be turned in. Then, the instructor reads through the proposals – detailing the type of reforms that is proposed. After reading the proposal, the class then votes if they support the reform. Here, many proposals are rejected because they violate one of the special rules from a permanent five member of the Security Council. With how the special rules are assigned, the only possible reforms that can pass without one of the P5 blocking the reform is increasing the number of seats on the UNSC. Students can increase the number of non-permanent seats or add permanent members to the Security Council as long as they do not have veto power. This is consistent with historical reform efforts. The only reform to the UNSC occurred in 1965, when four non-permanent seats were added to the Security Council (Hurd 2024).

Step 5: Discussion Questions and Review (5-10 Minutes)

Finally, students should answer a series of discussion questions to review what they learned. I have students in small groups and the following questions before answering them as a class:

- Why is UNSC reform so difficult to achieve?
- What actors are standing in the way? Why?
- Is any type of reform possible? If so, what?
- Should the UNSC be reformed? If so, what type of reforms?

This debrief aims to hit home the idea of why the Security Council is so hard to reform and why the United Nations, especially the Security Council, often fails to act.

Evaluation

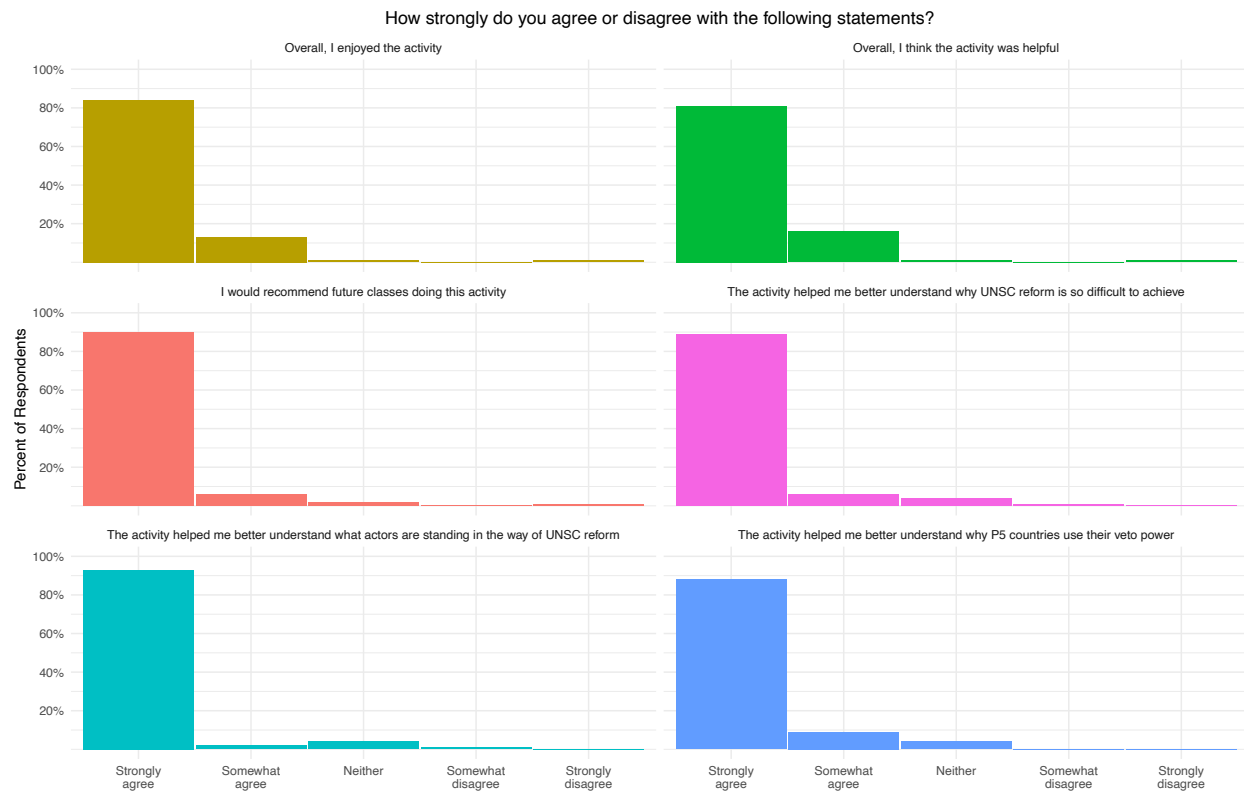
To ascertain the effectiveness of this activity, I had students across six classes take an anonymous evaluation survey to gauge student thoughts on the merits of the activity.

Additionally, I conducted a pretest-posttest design to determine if the activity improved student understanding and knowledge. The student evaluations and the pretest-posttest reveal that this activity is not only fun and engaging for students but also improves student comprehension.

Student Evaluations

Students were asked to participate in an optional and anonymous survey regarding the activity. As presented in Figure 1, 84% of the students strongly agreed that they enjoyed the activity; 81% of the students strongly agreed that the activities were helpful; 90% of the students strongly agreed that this activity should be used in future classes; 89% of the students strongly agreed that this activity helped them understand why UNSC reform is so difficult to achieve; 93% of the students strongly agreed that the activity helped them better understand what actors are standing in the way of UNSC reform; and 88% strongly agreed that the activity helped them understand why P5 countries use their veto power. Only one student disagreed or strongly disagreed with any of the statements presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Anonymous Student Survey



Pretest-posttest

Forthcoming...

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Appendix

Reform Proposal Worksheet

Nation or coalition proposing the plan: _____

Short summary of the proposed reforms:

Does your reform:	Y/N	Explanation
Change the veto power of the P5?		
Add new permanent members with veto power?		
Add new permanent members WITHOUT veto power?		
Add new non-permanent members?		
Make any other reforms?		

What countries/ coalitions support your proposed reform circle all that apply:

USA	U.K.	France	Russia	China	CARICOM (15 votes)
Brazil	Germany	India	Japan	Coffee Club (12 votes)	African Union (55 votes)