Op-ed

Democratising the United Nations
By William Gumede

Russia's war with Ukraine – and global responses to it – is not only remaking the post-Cold War world, but has shown that many existing global institutions, particularly the United Nations (UN), established in the aftermath of the Second World War to keep peace between countries, have lost their credibility, relevance, and authority.

The UN was established in 1945 by 51 countries to maintain international peace and security. The organisation has been spectacularly absent in both preventing and resolving Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In recent years, the UN has also been missing in action during many of the violent conflicts between countries. It has in many cases failed to maintain global peace, security, and intervene timeously in humanitarian crises. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the UN Security Council was largely absent in providing global leadership.

Unless something is done about reforming the UN into a more credible organisation, the global rule of law will collapse. In such a situation, the decline of the UN will raise the spectre of more copy-cat incidents of aggression by powerful countries against more vulnerable ones, making the world even more unstable, violent and chaotic.

The United Nations has three central weaknesses. One is the UN Security Council, which is limited to five permanent members (the P5) – China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The five have veto power on key UN decisions.

The P5 have often abused their power for their own national interests, rather than in the common interests of humankind.

In February 2022, Russia vetoed a UN Security Council resolution that would have demanded that the country stop its invasion of Ukraine and withdraw its troops. China has used its veto power to stop efforts to discuss criticisms of its role in Tibet, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Secondly, the P5 have often forced their own choices of UN general secretaries. They also dominate the appointment of heads of UN agencies, such as UNESCO, UNDP and the World Health Organisation.

The third weakness in the UN system is the way in which it conducts its business, its processes and meeting formats – called its working methods – which have been criticised as being secretive, untransparent and unaccountable. The permanent five members of the Security Council have consistently blocked proposals to make the working methods, procedures and decisions of the Council accountable. A veto from any of the P5 can stop any reform proposal.

Feeling excluded, many countries are increasingly not cooperating with UN-led attempts to mobilise international cooperation in global crises, such as wars, the health pandemics, and disasters.

Some countries have suggested the UN be replaced by an entirely new global organisation, given the unwillingness of the permanent members to let go of their power. During the first few weeks of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, when Russia as a permanent member of the Council blocked UN action, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky proposed a new "union of responsible countries" to replace the UN.

In 2009, the UN established the Intergovernmental Negotiations Framework (IGN) to look at Security Council reforms. The discussions within the forum are considered "informal", and not binding. Some countries have accused the permanent members of deliberately stalling.

There are essentially three broad overarching reform proposals or lobbies. Some countries – such as Brazil, Japan, Germany and India, referred to as the G4 – have proposed enlarging the UN Security Council by taking on at least six new permanent members, which would include Brazil, Japan, Germany, India and two African countries, and introducing an additional three elected seats on the Council.

Another lobby, the Uniting for Consensus group, nicknamed the Coffee Club, proposed a 26-member Council, with nine permanent seats among regions, and the remainder of the seats would be held for two-year terms, with the option of getting re-elected for another term. The Uniting for Consensus group rejects an increase in the number of permanent seats in the UN Security Council but argues for the increase in non-permanent seats.

African countries as a group, have proposed two permanent seats and two additional elected seats for Africa on the Council. South Africa has advocated for a 26-seat Council with an increase in permanent and non-permanent seats and giving representations to all five regions of Africa in some form on the Council.

More recently, there have been compromise reform proposals suggested by individuals outside the formal UN reform negotiations process. These proposals involve the five permanent members retaining their status but bringing in new rules that allow a majority of non-permanent members to override the decisions of the permanent five.

Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, the former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and former Jordan Ambassador to the UN, has proposed that a super-majority in the UN General Assembly should override any veto of a permanent member.

In another compromise proposal, former Colombian Finance Minister José Antonio Ocampo and former Turkish Economy Minister Kemal Derviş have similarly proposed a majority veto be introduced, to override a veto by a permanent member.

Clearly, given that permanent members appear resolutely opposed to relinquish their veto, such majority vote proposals to override the veto of permanent members should be considered. There is no question that for the UN to be retained, it will have to be democratised to become more relevant.

The idea of a limited number of countries having veto power should be abolished entirely. The veto is not only unfair, makes countries unequal and open to abuse, but it has also paralysed the function of the Council.

The pillars of the democratisation of the UN must include dissolving the feature of the UN Security Council as one with permanent members. It should be either fully dissolved or every country should through a rotation system become a member of the Council over time. Finally, the UN reforms must be on the basis that every country must have equal power, that regional blocs should not dominate, and that voting should be one vote per country – with each country having equal votes.

William Gumede is Associate Professor, School of Governance, University of the Witwatersrand, and author of* South Africa in BRICS *(Tafelberg). This is an edited extract from an occasional paper,* Democratising the United Nations*, written for the Inclusive Society Institute.