

ISIR Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (ISIRJAHSS)
ISSN: 3048-7463 (Online)
Frequency: Bimonthly
Published By ISIR Publisher
Journal Homepage Link- https://isirpublisher.com/index.php/isirjahss

AFRICA AND UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL REFORM: A REVIEW OF SCHOLARLY DEBATES ON REPRESENTATION AND EQUITY

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Article History

Received: 08/04/2026
Accepted: 30/05/2026
Published: 25/06/2026

Vol – 3 Issue – 3

PP: -130-136

Abstract

The United Nations Security Council was designed in 1945 by and for the states that won the Second World War. Africa, which was almost entirely under colonial occupation during this period, had no say in that design. Eighty years later, that original arrangement still guides the council and Africa today now has fifty-four sovereign states and accounts for more than sixty percent of what the Security Council actually spends its time discussing, yet holds no permanent seats in the body that makes the decisions. This paper reviews what scholars have argued about that situation specifically about whether the reform proposals being debated are sufficient to actually fix it. The argument this paper makes is twofold. First, representation and equity are not the same thing. Getting Africa into permanent membership without veto rights is a different arrangement that looks like reform but is not reform. Second, and less comfortably, Africa's reform strategy has focused almost entirely on what it deserves and almost nothing on what it must demonstrate. Deserving a seat and being positioned to hold it credibly are not the same thing either. This paper draws on power transition theory, democratic theory, and postcolonial theory to explain why Africa's demands are legitimate and why twenty years of legitimate demands have produced nothing.

Keywords: *United Nations Security Council, Institutional Reform, Representation, Equity, Veto Power*

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations created after WWII in 1945 was built on the ruins of the League of Nations, which had tried and failed to prevent that war, and its purpose as Article 1 of the UN Charter states, was to protect future generations from the same destruction (Adeniran, 2007). Six organs were established to carry out this purpose and the Security Council is the one with actual power. It is the organ that authorises military operations, imposes sanctions, and makes binding decisions on matters of international peace and security (Mbara, 2019; Adie, 2025). Everything else in the UN system is secondary to it.

The Security Council currently has fifteen members. Five namely: Russia, China, France, the United States and the United Kingdom hold permanent seats and the remaining ten seats rotate among the rest of the UN's one hundred and ninety-three member states on two-year terms. The difference between these two categories lie in power. Each permanent member holds veto power, meaning any one of the five can block any resolution on a substantive matter regardless of how the remaining fourteen members vote (Fassbender, 1998). This veto has been used to protect national interests and to paralyse Council action on crises where the permanent members disagree as it is the core instrument of power inside the most powerful body in international relations.

Africa has never held one of those permanent seats. This is a fact that sits uncomfortably alongside many others including the fact that Africa now has fifty-four sovereign states, making it the largest regional bloc in the entire United Nations. In 2023, seventy-eight of the Council's two hundred and four country-specific meetings were about African security issues, thirty-eight percent of all agenda items, more than any other region in the world (Security Council Report, 2024). Eighty-four percent of UN police and military personnel are deployed in peace support operations on the African continent (Sellström, 2023). Africa is, in obvious terms, the primary subject of Security Council activity but it has no permanent role in shaping that activity.

Ojo spotted this as far back as 1981, which tells you how long Africa has been saying the same thing for years by showing how African states entering the UN during the decolonization era discovered quickly that there were levels to formal membership (Ojo, 1981). In the General Assembly where

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votes could be won, African states used them to push resolutions on decolonization and apartheid but in the Security Council, where they made binding decisions, it remained beyond Africa's reach at the level of permanent membership. O'Sullivan (2005) later traced the same pattern in more detail, showing how the UN simultaneously expanded formal African sovereignty while protecting European dominance inside the Council's permanent structure.

Africa's formal position on reform has remained the same since 2005 when the African Union adopted the Ezulwini Consensus at its seventh extraordinary executive session in Addis Ababa. The position clearly stated that Africa wants not fewer than two permanent seats with full veto rights equivalent to existing permanent members, and not fewer than five non-permanent seats (African Union, 2005a). The African Group submitted this as draft resolution A/59/L.67 to the General Assembly later that year (United Nations, 2005). It has been recited like a nursery rhyme at every reform session since then but it has never been implemented.

The scholarly debate about why this is the case, and what should happen, is the major concern of this paper. But the debate has a gap at its centre that this paper tries to address. Most scholars frame the reform as a representation problem in which Africa needs to be included in permanent membership. However, only a few scholars have asked what kind of permanent membership Africa would actually receive, and whether that membership would give Africa genuine authority or just the appearance of it.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The scholarly literature on UNSC reform is a lot with focus on institutional history, international law, political economy, African foreign policy, and increasingly postcolonial critique. This review organises that literature into four themes, each representing a distinct line of argument that scholars have developed.

The Argument from Representation Injustice

Bourantonis (2004) provides one of the early accounts of the representation injustice argument by tracing the Council's history from its original eleven-member form to its current fifteen-member structure after the 1965 expansion. Even that expansion, he states, left the permanent membership completely untouched. Decolonization brought dozens of new African states into the General Assembly but did not produce any change in who held permanent authority in the Council.

Adebajo (2002) makes this argument from an African perspective claiming that African states have consistently been subjects of Council decisions rather than makers of them especially how the continent contributes troops to peacekeeping operations deployed on its own soil while having no ability to veto the resolutions that authorise those operations. Tieku (2004) adds to this by examining how this accumulated frustration eventually pushed African states toward a more unified continental position after recognizing that bilateral lobbying had produced nothing and a collective stance was the only way to be heard.

More recent scholarship has kept updating the statistical picture. ACCORD (2025) notes that over the two decades since the Ezulwini Consensus, the proportion of UNSC agenda items relating to Africa has been consistently above fifty percent, while Africa's formal authority in the Council has stayed exactly at zero permanent seats. Mbete (2024) makes the case for two full permanent seats on the basis of Africa's demographic weight, its regional diversity, and its disproportionate share of Council business. The representation injustice argument, while valid and almost universally accepted in academic literature, can not be the only justification for a UNSC reform.

The Reform Practicality Problem

A significant portion of the literature is pessimistic about whether meaningful reform is achievable regardless of how correct Africa's claim is and Weiss (2003) makes this argument most bluntly by describing the entire conversation around UNSC reform as largely a performance of a diplomatic exercise that none of the major actors seriously intends to complete. He documents how P5 members have repeatedly expressed support for reform in principle while blocking every specific proposal in practice is difficult to argue with. The pattern has continued even till now.

Fassbender (1998) identifies the legal structure that makes this possible under Article 108 of the UN Charter that any amendment requires ratification by two-thirds of UN member states and all five permanent members. The P5 effectively holds veto power over their own reform which is a smart move by the great powers to ensure that the great powers would not be reformed against their will. Kugel (2009), writing after the 2005 failure, argued that this is precisely why the reform debate needed a genuinely new strategy that engaged the reasons why reform is resisted rather than repeating the same proposals in the same forums.

Alene, Ali and Tadesse (2023) take a position that is more uncomfortable for Africa specifically. They agree that the continent's claim is legitimate but argue that the way Africa has pursued it through the Ezulwini Consensus's maximalist demand for full veto rights makes it very difficult for even sympathetic permanent members to publicly endorse. The veto is the sticking point that allows P5 members to appear supportive while doing nothing concrete. This observation, while valid, raises a different problem about the alternative of accepting permanent seats without veto rights.

Prantl (2005) in his work on Informal groups of states and the UN Security Council examines the Council's shadow design where the informal processes through which penholderships and P5 decision-making actually determine outcomes even before formal meetings start and adding new seats to the Council will not automatically disrupt this informal structure. Africa's experience in non-permanent seats, as Sellström (2023) documents, provides real evidence for this concern because even elected African members still struggle to exercise meaningful influence because the actual work is done in backrooms where the P3 dominate.

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Representation Versus Equity

Most UNSC reform scholarship thinks the major problem is representation but nobody really talks about what kind of membership Africa will actually get when it gets that representation, or whether it will be able to make any real decisions. This problem is not peculiar to UNSC because it is very common in other international organisations where Africa has seats. But does Africa actually make the decisions or are the decisions already made before Africa opens its mouth?

Akemu et al. (2024) separate formal representation from actual decision-making capacity and honestly that distinction explains everything wrong with how this UNSC reform debate is framed. Adding African states to a membership list while leaving power structures unchanged will obviously not produce genuine inclusion. Agwu (2013) makes the same point from a different angle adding that UNSC decisions would carry more weight if membership were truly comprehensive, but only if the new members actually have authority equivalent to the ones already there. The question was never really about whether Africa gets a seat or maybe it was, but that was never the right question.

Then there is the U.S. position from 2024 where Washington came out in support of permanent African seats but clearly did not support veto rights. The Wilson Center (2024) called it a non-proposal because while they did not agree to what Africa actually wanted, they agreed to the version of what Africa wanted that costs them nothing and gives Africa nothing. Saying yes to permanent seats without veto rights is clearly a distraction and a way of appearing to be on Africa's side while making sure Africa gets none of the power that makes the side worth being on. The Ezulwini Consensus saw this coming twenty years ago which is why it insisted on veto rights equivalent to existing permanent members.

The Debate Africa Is Having With Itself

There is a real competition among African states over who would actually occupy the prospective permanent seats. Adebajo (2006) records the criticism circulating in African diplomatic and scholarly circles that Nigeria is "too anarchic," Egypt "too Arab," and South Africa "too albinocratic" to convincingly represent the continent in UNSC (Adebajo, 2006, p. 26). And while these descriptions are apt, Africa should not be having this disagreement publicly. Whatever disagreement that exists should stay inside the house and Africa should show a unified front outside but right now, Africa is doing the opposite, having the internal disagreement loudly enough that it leaks into how Africa shows up in reform negotiations. and if Africa cannot agree on its own candidates, external support cannot be operationalised.

Alkali (2022) examines Nigeria's specific candidacy and applies a rigorous analysis of whether the country currently meets the internal capacity criteria that its reform claim implicitly requires.

What needs to replace it is a clear criteria set by the African Union to determine who gets the seat and Alkali (2022) examined Nigeria's specific candidacy against this kind of internal capacity criteria and found the results genuinely mixed in ways that academic literature does not usually engage with directly. Nigeria has the population and the historical regional leadership. But its economic situation, political environment and military capacity are disqualifications that affect candidates credibility.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

No single theory is enough to explain what is actually happening with UNSC reform and Africa's place in it which is why this paper draws on these three theoretical frameworks.

Power Transition Theory

Power Transition Theory made an uncomfortable point that the rest of the literature was dancing around. Organski (1958) built the theory around one core idea: that you cannot demand a place at a powerful table until you have elevated yourself to the level of the people already sitting there. The dominant power sets the rules of the international order and keeps setting them until a challenger grows internally strong enough economically, militarily and institutionally to make resistance more costly than accommodation. Power is only recognised when the people holding it feel that you are comparable to them in your actual capacity.

This is what makes the theory so relevant to Africa's reform demand. Africa is not only asking for representation, but also equity, a seat that carries the same weight as the seats already occupied. But do the states Africa is demanding equity from actually see Africa as equal? And if not, what does Africa have to do to make them? Vreeland and Dreher (2014) show through political economy analysis that the material and political advantages of Council membership depend directly on the authority that membership carries which means the P5 have a concrete interest in ensuring new permanent seats come without veto rights. Khan et al. (2022) add that rising powers only succeed in contesting institutional hierarchies when they build enough internal credibility to make the dominant power's resistance unsustainable. This just means the moral argument has to be backed by something the dominant power cannot ignore.

Democratic Theory

Democratic theory is simpler to state but no less damning in what it reveals. The simple definition of democracy which is "Government of the people, for the people, by the people" is a standard the Security Council fails by. The Council's decisions which are also about African people and are supposedly for African people are not made by African people especially not at the permanent level where real authority exists. It is as a result of this that Agwu (2013) argues that UNSC decisions would carry greater legitimacy and enforceability if the membership genuinely reflected the communities most affected by those decisions. Strydom (2007) makes an even harder point that an institution claiming to act on behalf of the entire international community while permanently excluding its largest regional bloc has a credibility problem that cannot be fixed by a procedural reform without addressing who actually holds power inside it.

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Stephen (2018) popularly describes the gap that opens when an institution's structure stays the same while the world it was designed to govern keeps changing around it as a "legitimacy drift". That gap is a democratic deficit in real time and a reform that adds African seats without adding African authority does not close that deficit, it just makes the institution look slightly less embarrassing while remaining the same.

Postcolonial Theory

Africa was decolonized, but the Security Council was not and this is the postcolonial argument in one sentence and everything else in this framework explains it. O'Sullivan (2005) traces the historical evidence showing how the decolonization era gave African states formal sovereignty and General Assembly seats while leaving the Council's permanent structure completely untouched. Then Mazrui (1967) also argued that the institutions of global governance were designed to manage the transition from direct colonial rule to neocolonialism and the Security Council's founding configuration is a clear institutional expression of that bargain.

If the UNSC's structure is a continuation of colonial hierarchy under a different name, then what does it mean when all five permanent members including two former colonial powers now rhetorically endorse African representation while refusing to grant the veto that would make that representation real? It simply means the language has changed, but the structure has not. Africa is still operating within a system of indirect subordination but just like imperialism in Africa before now, it comes in the language of support and solidarity.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized a qualitative research method and is based solely on existing scholarly and institutional material.

Data was gathered first through peer-reviewed academic literature from journal articles, books, and book chapters through ResearchGate and Google Scholar using search terms identified. The search covered publications from 1981 through 2025, with earlier foundational works included intentionally to give the analysis historical grounding alongside current scholarship.

Primary institutional documents were accessed through the UN Digital Library and the African Union's official repository at au.int, alongside policy research from specialist institutions including ACCORD, the Wilson Center, CSIS, and Amani Africa which were used for documenting recent reform negotiations rather than for building theoretical argument.

There was a significant volume of material available on this subject, which created its own challenge. The literature was organised thematically rather than chronologically because that was the only approach that made the arguments legible alongside each other. The thematic debates in the literature review emerged from that process. The representation-equity distinction that structures this paper's central argument became obvious only after reading enough of the literature to notice that almost everyone was asking whether Africa could get a seat, and almost nobody was asking what kind of seat Africa would actually get, or whether Africa's leading candidates are currently positioned to hold it credibly. That second question, which power transition theory helped frame most sharply, is what this paper tries to understand

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The conversation is not whether Africa deserves reform, the existing literature has settled that but why the correctness of the case keeps failing to produce the outcome. Which leads to these discussions.

Why Representation without Equity is not Actually Reform

There is a version of UNSC reform that gives Africa permanent seats and changes nothing meaningful, and that version is now the dominant position of the P5 states that have declared support for African representation. The United States endorsed two permanent African seats in September 2024 without veto rights, France and the United Kingdom have made similar statements but what they are endorsing is a form of permanent membership structurally inferior to their own.

The Ezulwini Consensus expected this outcome twenty years ago and rejected it in advance even though its insistence on veto rights equivalent to existing permanent members is sometimes described as a strategic miscalculation that makes reform harder to achieve, but this misses what the Consensus was actually doing. Africa is not demanding the veto because it sees the veto as a nice to have, the Consensus explicitly states Africa's opposition to the idea of veto (African Union, 2005a). Africa is asking for equal veto rights because without them, permanent membership is a different and inferior status.

It is for this exact reason that The Wilson Center (2024) calls the U.S. position a "non-proposal" because it endorses the symbolic demand while rejecting the actual one and representation without equity is like giving you a seat at the table without allowing you to eat from the table.

The P5 Are Not Going to Move Because Africa Asks Nicely

When you create a system, you create it to serve you and as much as it looks and sounds like cynicism, that is just how institutions work in the world. The P5 built this system and they benefit from it daily so their resistance to African permanent membership is not even wrong from where they are standing. It only looks like obstruction from the outside but inside, it looks like self-preservation because that is what it really is.

Kugel (2009) argued that the reform strategy needed to move beyond the IGN's procedural cycling toward engaging the actual political economy of resistance. That engagement has still not happened at the level of strategic seriousness it requires. Normative arguments of equity, justice, and historical correction are necessary because they establish the legitimacy of the demand but legitimacy is not the same as leverage. The P5 will not grant full permanent membership to Africa because they are persuaded by the moral argument.

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They will only move when the cost of not moving exceeds the cost of moving.

Africa has spent years telling the world what Africa wants and what Africa deserves in UNSC but it has not spent nearly enough time telling the world what the world gets in return. This is not how successful negotiation works. The fundamental logic of negotiation is articulating your need while showing the other party what they gain from meeting it.

We already have the Ezulwini Consensus which is a statement of what Africa demands however, what is missing now is the document that explains, clearly what the P5 stands to gain from the UNSC reform and why giving Africa what it demands makes the Security Council more legitimate and capable of doing what the P5 themselves need it to do. Rights-based arguments establish that Africa deserves a seat but interest-based arguments are what might actually produce one.

What Africa's Non-Permanent Experience Actually Tells Us

Everyone talks about getting Africa a seat but nobody talks about what Africa will actually be able to do once it is sitting in it. In (Sellström 2023) analysis of Africa's record in elected Council seats, it shows that even as non-permanent members, African states face significant structural disadvantages. The penholder system already concentrates the drafting and management of country-specific resolutions in the hands of the P3 which obviously doesn't include any African country. Informal consultations, where the real negotiating happens are dominated by permanent members and African elected members often find themselves responding to texts rather than shaping them.

If Africa already has elected seats at the Council and still cannot shape the agenda, what exactly changes when those seats become permanent? The label changes obviously, but the power does not. A permanent seat inside a working culture that is designed to marginalise Africa is still a marginalised seat, it is just a more expensive one.

Africa's Internal Problem Cannot Be Ignored

The African Union's inaction regarding the candidate selection while understandable as a diplomatic strategy, is very costly.

ACCORD (2025) rightly observed that P5 members have used Africa's inability to name agreed candidates as a reason for inaction. The competition between Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt reflects genuine disagreements within the African diplomatic community about who can credibly speak for a continent of fifty-four states.

In 2022, Alkali's (2022) applied Power Transition Theory to Nigeria's candidacy raises questions that even though Nigeria has the demographic weight and the historical regional leadership, it does not currently have the economic stability and political coherence that would maximise the credibility of its claim. This can change, and arguably should change regardless of the UNSC reform question, but the reform strategy cannot pretend that the internal capacity question does not exist.

CONCLUSION

The United Nations Security Council was built in 1945 to reflect a world that no longer exists but has been remarkably effective at preserving that reflection. Africa has gone from a continent of colonies to a bloc of fifty-four sovereign states, the largest regional grouping in the entire United Nations. It contributes troops to peacekeeping operations conducted on its own soil and dominates the Council's active agenda but the permanent membership of that Council is exactly what it was when most of Africa was still under colonial rule.

This paper reviewed the scholarly debates on UNSC reform with one argument at its centre: representation and equity are not the same thing, and the difference matters. Being offered permanent seats without veto rights is not the reform Africa has been demanding but a different arrangement that looks reform while leaving the power structure intact. The Ezulwini Consensus has held its position for twenty years not because Africa is being rigid, but because Africa understands exactly what a permanent seat without a veto is worth, which is considerably less than what permanent membership is supposed to mean.

But this paper's more uncomfortable conclusion is that Africa has spent twenty years focused almost entirely on what it cannot control. It cannot force the P5 to move and cannot make them grant something they have no structural incentive to grant. What Africa can control, and has not done with sufficient seriousness, is the work that happens before any of that becomes possible.

Africa can resolve the candidate selection question by naming a credible candidate, through a transparent and legitimate continental process or even set a criteria for candidate selection. This. would change the political weight of the demand immediately. Africa can also be honest about the internal capacity question as a strategic recognition that the strongest argument for African permanent membership is not only that Africa deserves it but that Africa is ready to hold it responsibly, and that a Council with African permanent members would be more effective, more legitimate, and more representative of the world whose peace it is supposed to protect.

The seat will not be given, it will have to be made inevitable and the work of making it inevitable does not start in New York, but within Africa itself.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper makes four recommendations and they are not all comfortable ones.

First, Africa needs to decide who it is sending because nobody takes an order seriously if the person placing it cannot make up their mind. The lack of specificity in the candidate selection has cost the reform agenda more than any P5 veto ever has and the AU's Committee of Ten needs to develop a selection framework with explicit criteria.

Africa also needs to do the internal work required as there is a big difference between deserving something and being

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qualified for it and while Africa's case for permanent membership is legitimate, legitimacy and qualification are not the same thing. While this is not a valid reason to abandon the demand, it is a reason to take the internal work seriously, not only as preparation for reform but as something Africa should be doing anyway.

Talk is cheap and Africa has been talking about UNSC reform for twenty years with very little to show for it which is why Africa needs to stop asking and start leveraging. The moral case is already made and every P5 member has acknowledged it rhetorically but rhetorical acknowledgment costs nothing and changes nothing. What changes the calculation is pressure, the kind of pressure that makes the cost of continued inaction higher than the cost of reform. Africa has tools it has not used with any strategic seriousness. Its relationships with BRICS members, with Global South coalitions, with international financial institutions, with trade partners who need African markets and African resources, these are all leverage points. An Africa that coordinates its diplomatic positions with its economic relationships and makes UNSC reform part of the cost of doing business with the continent, is an Africa that is doing something different from what it has been doing.

Lastly, Africa should change the argument without abandoning it. The rights-based case for African permanent membership is necessary but it is also insufficient on its own, as twenty years of failure has demonstrated. Africa needs to add an interests-based argument to the rights-based one, showing not just what Africa deserves but what the world gains when Africa gets it. A Security Council with genuine African permanent membership is a Council whose decisions carry real legitimacy in the regions where they are enforced. That argument speaks to P5 interests in a way that historical grievance alone does not and Africa should be making it loudly and consistently, in every reform forum and at every diplomatic table, until it becomes impossible to ignore.

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