



Why Winning a Seat at the UN Security Council is Nothing to Write Home About

By Rasna Warah



The Kenyan government has been congratulating itself for securing a seat at the United Nations Security Council, perhaps believing - mistakenly - that such a “privilege” will somehow allow it to influence security issues affecting the African continent and will bestow on Kenya some kind of legitimacy that it did not enjoy before.

After Kenya was voted into the Security Council last month (after beating Djibouti in a second round of voting), the country’s Foreign Affairs Cabinet Secretary, Rachel Omamo, stated: “Kenya will [now] have an opportunity to shape the global agenda and ensure that our interests and the interests of Africa are heard and considered. We now have a voice at one of the most important decision making forums”.

Kenya has now joined a long list of countries that eventually hold membership in the Security Council, which is rotational except for the five countries that have permanent seats and veto-holding power, an arrangement that was made by the victors of World War II, who assigned themselves permanent status in the Council, ostensibly because they could be most relied on not to start another world war. The Council consists of 15 members, of which 10 are rotational non-permanent members elected for two-year terms. The non-permanent members may have a say in decisions made by the Security Council, but the ultimate decision rests with the five permanent veto-holding

members, namely the United States, Britain, France, Russia and China - also known as the P-5.

The UN Security Council is not a club of equals. The ten non-permanent members of the Council do not pose a serious threat to the P-5, though membership does give these countries the illusion of being influential. In fact, one might even say that Security Council resolutions amount to little, and are acted upon only if all of the five permanent members agree on them unanimously. Disagreements within the P-5 can stall and even stop resolutions and decisions from being implemented.

So non-permanent status has little or no impact on important security-related decisions. The only countries whose opinions matter are the P-5. And the P-5 can make unilateral decisions with only cursory or tokenistic reference to the non-permanent members. So, in essence, nothing moves at the Security Council without P-5 approval.

Let me give you just a few examples of how ineffectual occupying a non-permanent seat in the Security Council can be.

The Security Council did not intervene in Rwanda to prevent a genocide

Rwanda was elected as a non-permanent member of the Security Council in 1994, the very year a horrific genocide took place in that country. The UN Security Council did little to prevent the genocide that ravaged the country and left at least 800,000 people dead. There is speculation that France (a P-5 member) did not want to interfere in the conflict; in fact, Rwanda's president Paul Kagame has often accused France of being party to the genocide, a claim the latter has denied.

On its part, the United States had a hands-off approach towards conflicts in Africa, having burnt its fingers in Somalia the previous year when 18 American soldiers were killed in Mogadishu during a so-called humanitarian operation, and so it looked the other way when Rwandans were being slaughtered. Meanwhile, Rwanda, the non-permanent member, sat back and watched the genocide unfold before the world's eyes.

So if the role of the Security Council is to prevent crimes against humanity and war crimes and to promote peace, why is it that it failed miserably in preventing mass killings in a small African country? In fact, why did the UN's Department of Peacekeeping Operations, which takes instructions from the Security Council, withdraw troops from Rwanda just when the country needed them most? And why did Kofi Annan, the head of UN peacekeeping at the time, order Roméo Dallaire, who was in charge of the peacekeeping mission in Rwanda, to not to take sides as "it was up to the Rwandans to sort things out for themselves"? (Annan later explained to the journalist James Traub that "given the limited number of men Dallaire had at his disposal, if he initiated an engagement and some were killed, we would lose the troops".)

In his book *Shake Hands with the Devil*, Dallaire talks of being extremely frustrated with his inability to convince the UN in New York to allow him to take actions that could have saved lives, if not prevented the genocide from taking place in the first place. In fact, prior to the genocide, when Dallaire informed his bosses that militias were gathering arms and preparing for mass killings, "the matter was never brought before the UN Security Council, let alone made public", according to the writer David Rieff, author of *A Bed for the Night: Humanitarianism in Crisis*.

The UN's tendency to flee a country experiencing conflict or disaster is very common, as many Rwandans will attest. As génocidaires roamed freely in Rwanda, UN officials were busy packing their bags and catching chartered flights to neighbouring countries. And the UN Security Council members, including Rwanda, remained mum.

The UN Security Council – and by extension, the UN as a whole – has lost its moral authority over other human rights issues as well. For example, at the height of the Black Lives Matter protests in New York (where the UN Secretariat is based), Antonio Guterres, the UN Secretary-General, issued a memo to all UN staff asking them to refrain from participating in the demonstrations, ostensibly because as international civil servants, they were expected to remain apolitical and neutral. Maina Kiai, the former UN special rapporteur on freedom of assembly, condemned the Secretary-General's directive, saying it was “conflating the right to protest and racial equality with political partisanship”.

The Black Lives Matter protests occurred when the United States was experiencing a rise in COVID-19 cases and deaths. The pandemic, which has the potential to become an international security issue (economies that suffer high levels of unemployment and inequality tend to generate disaffection and political unrest, which can sometimes result in armed conflict), has yet to be discussed at the Security Council.

The Security Council did not impose sanctions on the US and Britain for going to war with Iraq

The UN Security Council did absolutely nothing to prevent the United States and Britain from going to war with Iraq in 2003. In fact, the United States went ahead and invaded Iraq in March of that year shortly after making a rather unconvincing argument at the Security Council that Saddam Hussein was harbouring weapons of mass destruction. (No such weapons were found in Iraq.) Yet no member of the Security Council (except France, which made an impassioned plea against the war) had the clout to force the United States and Britain not to go to war.

Even though the then UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, declared the war “illegal”, as it did not have the unanimous approval of the Security Council, there was nothing much he could do. And despite widespread anti-war protests around the world, President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair went ahead with their misguided plan, which some estimate cost more than 600,000 Iraqi civilian lives. Further, the Security Council did not vote to impose sanctions on the US and Britain for waging an illegal war for the obvious reason that the countries waging the war were part of the P-5.

Ironically, but not surprisingly, a decade earlier, in 1991, the Security Council had imposed sanctions on Iraq for invading and annexing parts of Kuwait.

The Security Council has failed to protect civilians caught in conflict

Now let's go to peacekeeping, the *raison d'être* of the Security Council. Currently there are 13 UN peacekeeping missions around the world, mostly in African countries, including the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), Mali, South Sudan and Western Sahara. However, as the case of Rwanda shows, there is little evidence that the presence of peacekeepers significantly reduces the threat of conflict in these countries or protects civilians.

The UN's largest peacekeeping mission is in the DRC. Since 1999, MONUSCO, the UN's stabilising mission in the DRC, has deployed thousands of troops to the country. Yet the DRC, arguably the world's most mineral-rich country, remains the site of much poverty, conflict and human rights abuses as militias and the Congolese army fight to control mining areas and extract taxes.

Human rights organisations have for years raised the alarm on human rights violations, including rape, committed by both the army and armed groups, but the violence and abuse doesn't seem to stop. It is estimated that millions have died as a result of resource-based conflicts in the country. The

mineral-rich eastern part of the country has also been described as “the rape capital of the world”, where sexual violence is systematically used as a weapon of war.

The question arises: Despite a large presence of peacekeeping troops in the DRC, why are civilians still not safe? Could it be that some peacekeepers might in fact be party to the conflict? Scandals involving the illegal sale of arms by UN peacekeepers have been reported. In May 2007, for instance, the BBC reported that in 2005 UN peacekeeping troops from Pakistan had been re-arming Congolese militia (whom they were supposed to be disarming) in exchange for gold. A Congolese witness claimed to have seen a UN peacekeeper disarm members of the militia one day only to re-arm them the following day. The trade was allegedly being facilitated by a triad involving the UN peacekeepers, the Congolese army and traders from Kenya.

UN peacekeepers in conflict areas have also been reported to have sexually abused or exploited populations they are supposed to be protecting. An investigation by the Associated Press in 2017 revealed that nearly 2,000 allegations of sexual abuse and exploitation by UN peacekeepers had been made in troubled parts of the world. (This number could be a gross underestimation as the majority of victims of sexual exploitation or abuse do not report their cases.)

Peacekeeping missions have also been reported to have underplayed the scale of a conflict in order to prove that they are doing a good job of keeping the peace. When Aicha Elbasri, the former spokesperson for the African Union-United Nations Mission in Darfur (UNAMID), reported that UNAMID and the UN’s Department of Peacekeeping Operations routinely misled the media and the UN Security Council about crimes, including forced displacement, mass rape and bombing of civilians, committed by Sudanese government forces in Darfur, the UN failed to investigate her allegations. It only carried out an internal inquiry after she resigned in protest in 2013 and when the International Criminal Court (ICC) ordered the UN to do so; to this day the UN has not made the inquiry’s findings public, contrary to the ICC’s demand that such an inquiry be “thorough, independent and public”.

Elbasri later publicly released thousands of emails, police reports, internal investigations and diplomatic cables that exposed the failure of the UN to protect millions of Sudanese civilians under its protection.

The P-5 have a vested interest in the military-industrial complex

It is not lost on many people that the P-5 have a vested interest in wars in faraway places because wars keep their military-industrial complexes running. The weapons industry is huge, and countries that supply arms and military equipment would not like to the threat of war to fade away.

When wars occur in far-off places, arms manufacturers have a field day. Wars in former French colonies in Africa keep France’s military industrial complex well-oiled. Wars in the Middle East are viewed by British and American arms manufacturers as a boon for their weapons industries. If there were no wars or civil conflicts in the world, these industries would not be so lucrative.

It was no surprise then that Donald Trump’s first official foreign visit was to Saudi Arabia, which has been buying arms worth billions of dollars from the United States for decades. Arms from the US have kept the Saudi-led war in Yemen going. The connection between arms sales and the arms manufacturers’ silence on human rights violations committed by countries which buy the arms became acutely visible during that visit. This also explains Trump’s lukewarm response to the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The Security Council has put no pressure on the United States - which contributes almost a quarter

of the UN's budget - to rethink its policy towards arms sales to Saudi Arabia and other countries. On the contrary, the UN's campaign in Yemen, for example, is not about ending the war, but raising donations for the millions of Yemenis who are suffering as a result of Saudi-led bombings.

Make the Security Council more representative

The UN Security Council was established 75 years ago at a time when countries went to war with each other, and when Western powers had experienced severe physical and economic destruction and the loss of millions of lives. However, today's most deadly wars are being waged by insurgents or terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which have become transnational. The Security Council is not equipped to handle this new threat. New forms of international cooperation are required.

If Kenya wants to have real influence in the UN Security Council, it should lobby for the Council to be expanded and be made more representative and democratic. Countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America (regions that hold the majority of the world's population), must demand to be included as permanent members. Permanent membership should be allocated to those countries that have no vested interest in the weapons industry and which have not waged war in other countries since the Security Council was established in 1945 - countries that are genuinely committed to world peace. No country should have veto powers. Maybe that would make membership in the Council more democratic and meaningful.

However, even if this happens, membership might not amount to much as long as the UN's purse strings are controlled by a few rich and powerful countries which can sway other countries to vote in their favour and as long as some members have an interest in ensuring that their military-industrial complexes remain operational for a long time. Kenya, being a donor-dependent country, can therefore easily be influenced by rich donor countries. This is how the world, including the Security Council, operates.

Published by the good folks at [The Elephant](#).

The Elephant is a platform for engaging citizens to reflect, re-member and re-envision their society by interrogating the past, the present, to fashion a future.

Follow us on [Twitter](#).