

# THE SECURITY COUNCIL: ITS MEMBERSHIP, ROLE & POWERS

Wide view of the Security Council Chamber. The chamber was a gift to the United Nations from Norway. The mural depicts a phoenix rising from its ashes, symbolic of the world's rebirth after World War II

UN Photo



In order to ensure prompt and effective action by the United Nations, its Members confer on the Security Council primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agree that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf.

**Article 2,  
Charter of the United Nations**

The Charter of the United Nations entrusts the Security Council with the “maintenance of international peace and security” and gives it responsibility for ensuring “prompt and effective action by the United Nations”.

To realise these aims, the Charter grants the Security Council unique authority to pass resolutions that are binding on all Member States and it is the only UN body that can authorise military force.

With a membership restricted to just fifteen

countries, the Security Council is designed to react rapidly and decisively in response to evolving global security crises.

However, at times the Council has been criticised for failing to respond with speed and determination to breaches of international peace and security, and large scale human rights abuse.

## Role and membership

The Council has a membership of fifteen: five permanent members (often referred to simply as “the P5”) and ten non-permanent members. The permanent membership was established in 1945 as the five main victors of World War II: China, France, the Soviet Union (today the Russian Federation), the United Kingdom and the United States. Non-permanent members are elected for periods of two years by the General Assembly.

Nine affirmative votes by Security Council members are required to pass a resolution, with none of the P5 voting against. This so-called “veto” power means that each

permanent member may prevent the passage of any resolution regardless of the votes of other members of the Security Council. The UN Charter permits States that are not members of the Security Council to participate in its meetings without voting rights if their interests “are specially affected” or they are “party to a dispute under consideration”.

The Council’s membership structure and voting system is widely viewed as imperfect and in need of reform. Critics suggest that the Council poorly represents the overall geographical membership of the UN, particularly of the developing world. They also argue that the Council fails to give voice to all those States that most actively contribute to the work of the UN or to adequately represent the modern world’s balance of political and economic power. The veto power is also seen to impede timely and effective action in major security crises. While there is some consensus around an extension of membership, agreement remains elusive on the size of a reformed Council, the possible addition of new permanent members, or any extension or reform of the veto.

## Article VI Powers

In many cases, Security Council resolutions differ little in content from resolutions that

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The Security Council may, if all the parties to any dispute so request, make recommendations to the parties with a view to a pacific settlement of the dispute.

**Article 38,  
Charter of the United Nations**

might be passed on similar topics by other UN forums. They urge parties to conflicts, or those that might have an influence on events in conflict areas, to observe existing measures, modify their conduct or support new initiatives to bring about change.

Article VI of the Charter provides the Security Council with the power to propose solutions to international disputes. The Security Council may investigate any dispute (Article 34) and propose measures that might settle the disagreement (Article 36). With the approval of all parties to a dispute,

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The Members of the United Nations agree to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council in accordance with the present Charter.

**Article 25,  
Charter of the United Nations**



A Zambian peacekeeper on patrol in Sudan. UN peacekeepers deploy with the consent of parties to a conflict.

UN Photo/Stuart Price

UN peacekeepers in Côte d'Ivoire check the serial numbers on rifles used by government forces to ensure that they comply with an arms embargo. The Security Council may impose trade sanctions using its Chapter VII powers.

UN Photo/Ky Chung



the Security Council may also recommend “terms of settlement as it may consider appropriate” (Article 37).

Decisions made using Chapter VI powers are non-binding: States may consider them as recommendations, which they are not legally obliged to carry out. Operative clauses that begin with the opening phrases “Urges” or “Invites” are normally viewed as Article VI clauses and therefore non-binding.

## Acting under Chapter VII

If its proposals or recommendations are likely to be ignored, the Security Council may decide to make its resolutions binding



The Security Council may decide what measures not involving the use of armed force are to be employed to give effect to its decisions, and it may call upon the Members of the United Nations to apply such measures. These may include complete or partial interruption of economic relations and of rail, sea, air, postal, telegraphic, radio, and other means of communication, and the severance of diplomatic relations.

**Article 41,  
Charter of the United Nations**

on all Member States.

Chapter VII of the Charter gives the Security Council the authority to instruct Member States to take action to maintain or restore international peace and security. Resolutions containing the phrase “Acting under Chapter VII” therefore carry the full force of international law. States are similarly required to implement clauses beginning with the opening phrase “Demands” or “Decides”.

Actions that the Security Council may take under what are known as its “Chapter VII Powers” include imposing trade sanctions and authorising military action.

## Trade sanctions

The Security Council may impose economic sanctions on States that fail to implement its decisions.

In recent years, the Security Council has become concerned that embargoes on trade in necessities can place unnecessary strain on vulnerable civilian populations.

Much greater emphasis is now placed on sanctions targeted at specific individuals or ruling elites, such as travel bans and the freezing of financial assets. Recent sanctions have included embargoes on the trade in arms, diamonds, luxury goods and material that might support the development of nuclear weapons or ballistic missiles.

Resolutions that impose sanctions will also establish a sanctions committee. While the Security Council will decide the general terms of the sanctions it imposes, it is left to a committee to determine the exact terms of embargoes and to monitor their implementation.

## Authorising military force or a peacekeeping mission

Should its other enforcement powers prove insufficient, the Security Council may authorise the use of military force “by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security”.

The Security Council may establish mandates for large scale military operations. For example, in 1990 the Security Council authorised a coalition force of more than 950,000 troops from thirty four countries to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. However, such mandates are rare and often highly controversial.

The Security Council is much more likely to deploy soldiers in peacekeeping operations. Peacekeepers are deployed to build confidence in conflict areas by impartially monitoring ceasefires with the consent of all sides. It remains an important aspect of UN peacekeeping that missions deploy with the

Should the Security Council consider that measures provided for in Article 41 would be inadequate or have proved to be inadequate, it may take such action by air, sea, or land forces as may be necessary to maintain or restore international peace and security. Such action may include demonstrations, blockade, and other operations by air, sea, or land forces of Members of the United Nations.

### Article 42, Charter of the United Nations

consent of the parties to a conflict.

The role of the UN’s “blue helmets” has expanded and peacekeepers now carry out a range of duties including protecting civilians; ensuring the delivery of humanitarian aid; civilian policing; developing democratic institutions; monitoring and investigating human rights abuse; mine clearance; and the disarming, demobilising and reintegrating into society of former combatants. As of December 2018, there were more than 103,000 “blue helmets” deployed in fourteen conflict areas around the world.



Guinean peacekeepers patrol in Mali in their distinctive blue helmets and white armoured vehicles. As well as ensuring the security of the civilian population, the Guinean troops clear IEDs and land mines.

UN Photo/Harandane Dicko

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## Security Council Resolution Toolbox

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### Imposing an UN arms embargo

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1. *Decides* that all States shall prohibit the sale or supply to South Rengaan by their nationals or using their flag vessels or aircraft of arms and related materiel of all types, including weapons and ammunition, military vehicles and equipment, paramilitary equipment, and spare parts for the aforementioned, whether or not originating in their territories, and that all States shall prohibit the provision of technical advice or training related to such items;
2. *Affirms* that the measures imposed by paragraph (1) above shall not apply to:
  - (a) Protective clothing, including flak jackets and military helmets, for the use of United Nations personnel, the news media, and humanitarian or development workers;
  - (b) Supplies of military equipment, technical training and assistance intended solely to support humanitarian assistance or human rights monitoring;

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### Severing diplomatic relations

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1. *Decides* that all States shall significantly reduce the level of staff at South Rengaan diplomatic missions and consular posts, and withdraw any officials or agents present in South Rengaan to advise the South Rengaan authorities on diplomatic, political or military matters;

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### Freezing financial assets

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1. *Decides* that all States shall, in accordance with their respective legal processes, freeze immediately the funds, other financial assets and economic resources that are owned or controlled by persons or organisations designated by the Security Council or its Committees as constituting a threat to the peace and reconciliation process in South Rengaan;
2. *Further decides* that the provisions in paragraph (1) above do not apply to financial or other assets or resources that have been determined by relevant States, after notification to the Committee, to be for basic expenses, including payment for foodstuffs, medicines and medical treatment, taxes, or legal services;

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### Travel ban on senior political officials

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1. *Decides* that all States shall prevent the entry into or transit through their territories of persons designated by the Security Council or its Committees as constituting a threat to the peace and reconciliation process, together with their family members, except where the Committee determines on a case-by-case basis that such travel is justified on the grounds of humanitarian need, including religious obligations, or where a State is allowing its own nationals entry into its territory;

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### Banning trade in luxury goods

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1. *Decides* that all States shall prohibit any direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer to South Rengaan of all luxury goods, as defined by the Security Council or its Committees;

- I. *Decides* that all States shall prohibit:
  - (a) The import into their territories of all commodities and products originating in South Rengaan, and any dealings by their nationals or their flag vessels or in their territories in any commodities or products originating in South Rengaan;
  - (b) The sale or supply by their nationals or from their territories or using their flag vessels of any commodities or products to any person or organisation in South Rengaan, including weapons or any other military equipment, but not including supplies intended strictly for medical purposes, and, in humanitarian circumstances, foodstuffs;

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Full  
sanctions  
on all trade

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- I. *Decides* to establish a Committee of the Security Council to undertake the following tasks:
  - (a) To seek from all States information regarding actions taken by them to effectively implement the measures imposed in this resolution;
  - (b) To examine and recommend appropriate action on information regarding violations of measures imposed by this resolution, identifying where possible those reported to be engaged in such violations;
  - (c) To create and maintain lists and guidelines as may be necessary to facilitate the implementation of this resolution;
  - (e) To report to the Security Council at least every 90 days;

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Establishing  
a Security  
Council  
sanctions  
committee

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- I. *Authorizes* the establishment of the Security & Humanitarian Force in South Rengaan (abbreviated as SHFSR in all languages) with a mandate to:
  - (a) Protect civilians under threat of physical violence, particularly refugees and displaced persons;
  - (b) Facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid and the free movement of humanitarian personnel and human rights defenders by helping to improve security in the area of operations;
  - (b) Monitor, promote and protect human rights, with particular attention to sexual and gender-based violence, and to recommend action to the competent authorities;
  - (c) Protect United Nations personnel, facilities, installations and equipment and ensure the security and freedom of movement of its staff;
  - (d) ...
2. *Calls upon* Member States to contribute personnel, equipment and other resources to SHFSR, and invites the Secretary-General to establish a maximum number of military officers and supporting civilian personnel appropriate to its mandate;
3. *Authorizes* Member States participating in the SHFSR to take all necessary measures to fulfil its mandate;

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Authorising  
a new  
UN peace  
mission  
(simplified  
version)

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