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Japan’s Participation in the Working Group on Security Council Reform

I don’t have an opinion on Security Council reform, I have a veto. Comment by a diplomat belonging to one of the Five Permanent Security Council members, asked about Security Council reform (told to this author by a diplomat accredited to the UN).

Introduction

This chapter first provides a short overview of past attempts to reform the Security Council, followed by an analysis of the detailed positions which Japan has taken on Council reform in the working group on Security Council reform which began its work in January 1994. These various Security Council reform items can be roughly divided into issues related to equal representation on the Council (for example, scope of enlargement, veto right), membership qualification (for example, financial power) and working practices of the Council (for example, transparency). The final part deals with Japan’s efforts to promote its bid during 1997 which was considered the make-or-break year of Security Council reform. In order to provide a comparative perspective, Japan’s stance and activity in the Working Group are compared with Germany, the only other industrialized country having publicly declared its candidature for permanent Security Council membership.

Historical background of security council reform attempts

Given the very different political orientations and interests of member states, it has never been an easy task to find the support of a two-third, ratification majority which is needed for UN reform. The task is made
even more difficult by the diversity of the P5 which all have to be won
over, but which have – apart from political reasons – an inbuilt aver-
sion to changes possibly threatening their privileges.

Although pressure from founding member states led to Article 109,
in addition to Article 108 which stipulates that amendments need a
two-thirds ratification majority of the General Assembly, including
agreement by the P5, there have been so far no amendments apart
from an expansion of the number of non-permanent members from
six to 10 in 1965 and two enlargements of the membership of the
Economic and Social Council in 1965 and 1973, as well as a technical
amendment relating to Article 109 in 1968.² This situation impeded
reform, although Charter revisions are considered in the General
Assembly, not in the Security Council. The General Assembly first con-
sidered Charter review in 1955 in compliance with Article 109(3) of the
Charter, and adopted a resolution deciding in principle that a confer-
ence to review the Charter should be held ‘at an appropriate time’. The
General Assembly dealt with the issue by establishing a committee of
the whole to keep the matter under review which met until 1967 more
or less regularly and reported to the General Assembly.³

The use of the veto and the difficulty of the Security Council in ful-
filling its obligations added further pressure for reform of the Council.
During the first 25 years of the work of the Security Council, the veto
was identified almost entirely with Soviet obstructionism.⁴ Between
1945 and 1970, the Soviet Union blocked Council action with its veto
108 times, Britain five times and France four times. China (represented
during that time by Taiwan) did so once, and the US used it once. With
the increase of Third World countries in the 1970s and 1980s, the
Western members resorted more often to the use of the veto. From
1971 to 1990, the US used the veto 66 times, Britain 28 times, the
Soviet Union 16 times, France 14 times and China (represented now by
the People’s Republic of China) six times. Since late 1981, China has
not used the veto, with the exception of a veto on 10 January 1997 to
kill a resolution authorizing a small peace-keeping mission for Guatemala
because of the country’s ties with Taiwan.⁵

The confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union provided an
effective control mechanism over the Security Council, although the
other side of the coin was largely an inability of the Council to main-
tain international peace and security. The veto has always provided for
a stark choice between accepting weaker language and limited action
for broad support, or risking a veto. Any survey of the past use of the
veto cannot take into account those vetoes which were never made