

Security Council (UNSC) Background Guide

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Security Council Background Guide

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The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the principal organ responsible for maintaining international peace and security.¹ Established in 1945 under the UN Charter, the Council holds legally binding authority over Member States, with the power to authorize peacekeeping operations, impose sanctions, refer cases to international courts, and adopt enforcement measures under Chapter VII.² Unlike other UN bodies, the Security Council operates at the intersection of international law, diplomacy, and coercive power, making it a uniquely positioned actor in post-conflict governance.

Transitional justice has emerged as a key dimension of the Security Council's peace and security mandate. While transitional justice mechanisms are often associated with domestic legal reform or international tribunals, the Security Council plays a critical role in enabling, mandating, and sustaining these efforts – particularly in fragile and conflict-affected settings.³ From establishing ad hoc tribunals to supporting hybrid and domestic accountability processes, the UNSC has historically used its authority to shape the global justice landscape. However, Security Council engagement has varied by context, often contingent on national political will, the state of peacekeeping efforts, timing, and internal Council dynamics.⁴

Beyond its legal functions, the Council's jurisdiction also encompasses broader questions of reconciliation, social cohesion, and governance reform. In post-conflict environments where mass atrocities, state collapse, and regional spillover are prevalent, it is often tasked with overseeing or enabling transitional justice processes that aim to prevent the recurrence of violence, rebuild trust in public institutions, and lay the foundation for sustainable peace.⁵ Whether through referrals to the International Criminal Court (ICC), the deployment of

¹ United Nations Security Council, *What Is the Security Council?* (New York: United Nations), <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/what-security-council>.

² United Nations, *Charter of the United Nations: Chapter VII*, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/chapter-7>.

³ United Nations Security Council, *What Is the Security Council?*

⁴ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*, February 26, 2021, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/transitionaljustice_2021.pdf.

⁵ António Guterres, "Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes," United Nations Secretary-General, November 19, 2019, <https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/speeches/2019-11-19/role-of-reconciliation-processes-remarks-security-council>.

peacekeepers with justice mandates, or diplomatic pressure to include reconciliation in peace accords, the Security Council operates as a central actor in shaping the global response to atrocity crimes.

However, geopolitical forces significantly influence how this mandate is applied. The veto power held by the Security Council's five permanent members often limits its ability to respond consistently across conflicts, resulting in selective engagement and a fragmented approach to justice on a global scale.⁶ Ongoing debates over sovereignty, intervention, and the politicization of international law continue to redefine the Security Council's role in defining what justice looks like in the aftermath of conflict.

I. Transitional Justice: National Reconciliation and Accountability

Statement of the Issue:

Transitional justice is a complex and abiding issue in the aftermath of conflict or systematic oppression, encompassing a range of judicial and non-judicial processes.⁷ These mechanisms – truth commissions, criminal prosecutions, reparations programs, and institutional reforms – are intended not only to confront legacies of violence, but to lay the foundation for sustainable peace and democratic governance. Their success often hinges on timing, legitimacy, and political will – factors that remain uneven across conflict-affected states.⁸

The objective of transitional justice is to restore the rule of law while enabling long-term reconciliation. The Security Council, in turn, must assess whether this dual mandate can be fulfilled, and how such a balance can be achieved in practice. Given the current state of global affairs, this task is becoming increasingly complex.⁹ Contemporary civil wars are often shaped by decentralized non-state actors, cross-border dynamics, and short-lived ceasefires, making it difficult to effectively implement international tribunals. Meanwhile, geopolitical tensions and veto politics continue to paralyze the Security Council's ability to act decisively, especially in conflicts where permanent members hold direct strategic interests.

⁶ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

⁷ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

⁸ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

⁹ António Guterres, "Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes."

At the core of the issue are competing imperatives: the desire for national reconciliation often clashes with demands for legal accountability. Some transitional justice models prioritize social healing and political stability, while others emphasize individual prosecution and the enforcement of international norms.¹⁰ In post-conflict settings where peace remains fragile, initiating war crime investigations may be perceived as undermining ceasefires or alienating key negotiating parties.¹¹ At the same time, there is ongoing disagreement over who should lead transitional justice efforts: national governments asserting their sovereignty, international courts upholding universal legal standards, or local communities advocating for justice tailored to their specific contexts.¹² These tensions complicate both the legitimacy and the practical implementation of justice mechanisms.

These questions have become more urgent as ongoing crises expose the limitations of the existing system. In Syria, systematic war crimes have gone largely unpunished, with vetoes blocking international referrals. In Ukraine, calls for international prosecution continue amid active conflict. In Palestine, renewed appeals for ICC investigations have reopened debates over jurisdiction, political bias, and the uneven application of international law. Across all regions, public trust in multilateral justice mechanisms is weakening, fueled by perceptions of politicization, inconsistency, and inaction.¹³

While the Security Council retains legal authority over matters of international peace and security, its credibility as a forum for global justice is increasingly under scrutiny. In an era defined by geopolitical polarization, the Security Council must determine how to adapt its tools to meet current realities.

History:

The Security Council's engagement with transitional justice has evolved significantly over the past three decades, reflecting shifts in international legal norms, geopolitical dynamics, and the nature of conflict itself. The Security Council formally entered the transitional justice

¹⁰ António Guterres, "Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes."

¹¹ Security Council Report, Transitional Justice: Report No. 1.

¹² International Center for Transitional Justice, "*Now Is a Time to Lead: Advancing Transitional Justice Initiatives through Local Governments in Nepal* (July 2018), [https://www.ictj.org/publication/now-time-lead-advancing-transitional-justice-initiatives-through-local-governments\(NHRC\)](https://www.ictj.org/publication/now-time-lead-advancing-transitional-justice-initiatives-through-local-governments(NHRC)).

¹³ Security Council Report, Transitional Justice: Report No. 1.

sphere in the 1990s, and has since incorporated the topic and its considerations in various mandates.

In 1993, the UNSC established the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), the first international war crimes tribunal since Nuremberg.¹⁴ The following year, it created the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) in the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide, in which an estimated 800,000 people were killed over the course of just 100 days.¹⁵ Many argue that intervention could have prevented the scale of the atrocity, making this one of the most widely regarded failures of the Security Council. While the ICTY and ICTR set critical legal precedents for prosecuting genocide, crimes against humanity, and war crimes, their mandates were geographically limited, their operations resource-intensive, and the process of delivering justice proved slow and complex.¹⁶

The early 2000s saw a growing institutionalization of transitional justice within the UN system. In 2004, the Secretary-General released a landmark report, “The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies,” which established a foundational framework built around four pillars: truth, justice, reparation, and guarantees of non-recurrence.¹⁷ This was followed by the Security Council’s first referral to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2005, directing the Court to investigate crimes in Darfur.¹⁸ In 2010, the Secretary-General issued a Guidance Note on Transitional Justice, which emphasized the importance of national ownership, careful sequencing, and context-specific approaches.¹⁹ Together, these developments broadened the Security Council’s justice mandate and encouraged a more flexible, inclusive understanding of accountability.

Over the next decade, the Security Council supported more diverse mechanisms, including hybrid tribunals and regionally embedded models. The Special Court for Sierra Leone, created through a partnership between the UN and the Government of Sierra Leone,

¹⁴ United Nations Security Council, *Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia*, S/RES/827 (May 25, 1993), <https://www.icty.org/en/about/tribunal/establishment>.

¹⁵ United Nations Security Council, *Statute of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda*, S/RES/955 (November 8, 1994), <https://main.un.org/securitycouncil/en/content/repertoire/international-tribunals>.

¹⁶ International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, “The Tribunal – Establishment,” <https://www.icty.org/en/about/tribunal/establishment>.

¹⁷ United Nations Security Council, “The Rule of Law and Transitional Justice in Conflict and Post-Conflict Societies: Report of the Secretary-General,” S/2004/616 (August 23, 2004), <https://www.refworld.org/reference/themreport/unscc/2004/en/42867>.

¹⁸ Office of the Prosecutor, International Criminal Court, “Security Council Refers Situation in Darfur, Sudan, to the ICC Prosecutor,” March 31, 2005, <https://www.icc-cpi.int/news/icc-security-council-refers-situation-darfur-icc-prosecutor>.

¹⁹ United Nations Secretary-General, *Guidance Note of the Secretary-General: UN Approach to Transitional Justice* (March 2010), <https://peacemaker.un.org/en/documents/guidance-note-secretary-general-un-approach-transitional-justice>.

demonstrated a more localized model of prosecution.²⁰ In South Sudan, the Security Council backed a transitional justice framework as part of the 2015 peace agreement, incorporating truth-seeking, reparations, and institutional reform alongside a proposed hybrid court.²¹ However, the Security Council's failure to act decisively on the Syrian Civil War (beginning in 2011) or the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar (escalating in 2017), largely due to vetoes by permanent members, exposed the limitations of consensus-based enforcement, particularly in politically sensitive contexts.²² During this period, the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) was also established to conclude the remaining work of the ICTY and ICTR, offering a more streamlined and cost-effective mechanism for case completion and witness protection.²³

In recent years, the Security Council has faced renewed scrutiny over its ability to deliver justice amid escalating global crises. In 2019, the Secretary-General urged Member States to adopt a more holistic approach to justice that seeks to heal communities, not merely punish individuals.²⁴ This prompted a greater focus on reconciliation within Security Council discussions, though as new crises emerged, internal divisions and competing strategic priorities further fractured consensus around transitional justice mechanisms.²⁵

The war in Ukraine, beginning in 2022, triggered an unprecedented global push for accountability, yet Security Council action remained blocked by Russia's veto.²⁶ Around the same time, the International Criminal Court opened investigations into alleged crimes in Palestine, though several Member States – including the United States, Israel, and some European allies such as Germany and Hungary – actively opposed its jurisdiction, arguing that Palestine is not a sovereign state and therefore not party to the Rome Statute.²⁷ This opposition

²⁰ *Special Court for Sierra Leone*. Hybrid Justice Project, <https://hybridjustice.com/special-court-for-sierra-leone>.

²¹ United Nations. *Report of the Secretary-General on South Sudan*, 13 Nov. 2015, S/2015/899. United Nations Digital Library, <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2015/899>.

²² de Greiff, Pablo. *Transitional Justice and Development: Cross-Cutting Issues*. United Nations University, 2006, https://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/attachment/4840/UNU_TJ_Crosscutting.pdf.

²³ "Security Council Adopts Resolution on International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT)." *International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia*, 29 Dec. 2010, <https://www.icty.org/en/press/security-council-adopts-resolution-international-residual-mechanism-criminal-tribunals-irmct>.

²⁴ António Guterres, "Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes."

²⁵ United Nations, *Report of the Secretary-General on Children and Armed Conflict*, S/2019/800 (August 2019), <https://docs.un.org/en/S/2019/800>.

²⁶ Olivier Corten and Vaios Koutroulis, *Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression Against Ukraine* (European Parliament Think Tank, 2022), https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/IDAN/2022/702574/EXPO_IDA%282022%29702574_EN.pdf.

²⁷ Samuel Issacharoff, "The ICC as a Court of Last Resort? Palestine, Ukraine, and the Question of Scope," *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law* 53, no. 2 (2022): exemplifying article contents relevant to ICC jurisdiction debates, <https://scholarlycommons.law.case.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi>.

persisted despite broad support for ICC engagement from the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council. By 2023 and 2024, Member States began exploring new accountability models in both Ukraine and Palestine, but structural constraints continued to limit the UNSC's engagement. As a result, the Security Council's justice-related deliberations have become increasingly symbolic, with non-governmental organizations, regional courts, and grassroots movements stepping in to fill the void.²⁸

Throughout its history, the Security Council has helped define the global framework of transitional justice, but its capacity to lead has diminished in the face of rising polarization. The legacy of past tribunals and policy frameworks remains influential, but new tools, partnerships, and governance models are increasingly necessary to adapt to the demands of contemporary conflict.

Analysis:

The Security Council's role in transitional justice is shaped by overlapping political, legal, and institutional constraints, which complicate its ability to serve as a reliable agent of international justice. While the Security Council maintains formal authority to refer cases, authorize missions, and impose sanctions, its practical capacity to support reconciliation and justice on the ground is increasingly fragmented and contested.

Reconciliation takes multiple forms across post-conflict contexts – ranging from truth commissions and reparations programs to demobilization strategies, power-sharing arrangements, and constitutional reform. In South Africa, reconciliation centered on public truth-telling; in Colombia, on reintegrating former combatants into society;²⁹ in Bosnia, on institutional power-sharing to maintain ethnic balance.³⁰ Despite these differences, reconciliation processes share a common goal: repairing broken social trust and restoring the legitimacy of state institutions.³¹ However, such mechanisms are frequently subject to political influence, with some processes delayed or strategically timed in ways that critics argue deflect from more robust

²⁸ United Nations, *Report of the Security Council 2023-2024: Consolidating Peace* (S/2024/15558), March 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15558.doc.htm>.

²⁹ International Center for Transitional Justice, "Colombia," ICTJ, <https://www.ictj.org/location/colombia>.

³⁰ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *BTI 2024 Country Report – Bosnia and Herzegovina*, <https://bti-project.org/en/reports/country-report/BIH>.

³¹ "Truth and Reconciliation Commission (South Africa)," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Truth-and-Reconciliation-Commission-South-Africa>.

demands for legal accountability. In the absence of structural reform or acknowledgement of harm, reconciliation efforts risk reinforcing existing inequalities or consolidating impunity. Centering civilian needs – particularly those of victims, displaced communities, and marginalized groups – must remain a priority in any reconciliation framework supported by the Security Council.³²

The pursuit of justice during or after armed conflict often intersects with the delicate nature of multilateral negotiations. Efforts to prosecute war crimes can make certain actors, especially those who fear accountability, less willing to sign peace agreements, disarm, or join transitional governments.³³ But if no one is held accountable, public trust in those same peace agreements often fades.

Sustainable peace requires political inclusion, territorial compromise, and the demobilization of armed actors, but it also depends on confronting the root causes of violence and affirming legal norms. The question of when to pursue justice, during a conflict or after it ends, remains a persistent dilemma. This is most evident in cases where the line between combatant and civilian is blurred, or when political elites remain in power following peace settlements.³⁴ In places like Sudan and South Sudan, international justice efforts are often sidelined in favor of short-term stability.³⁵ While these decisions may ease immediate tensions, they often undermine public trust and weaken long-term institutional legitimacy.³⁶

The Security Council's engagement with transitional justice is most frequently constrained by veto politics and selective enforcement.³⁷ Repeated attempts to refer the situations in Syria, Myanmar, and Palestine to the ICC have failed due to the opposition of permanent members, despite widespread documentation of atrocity crimes.³⁸ Even when referrals occur, as

³² António Guterres, "Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes."

³³ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

³⁴ Richard Downie, *The Sudan Referendum: Will It Be Fair?*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 2011, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/legacy_files/files/publication/110623_Downie_Sudan_Web.pdf.

³⁵ Peter Biar Ajak, *National Dialogue and Trust-Building in South Sudan*, PeaceRep: The Peace and Conflict Resolution Evidence Platform, May 2022, <https://peacerep.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Sudan-Report-Digital-min.pdf>.

³⁶ Jack Snyder and Leslie Vinjamuri, *Trials and Errors: Principle and Pragmatism in Strategies of International Justice*, Northwestern University School of Law Faculty Working Papers, Paper 1138, 2003, <https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi>.

³⁷ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

³⁸ Human Rights Watch, "UN Security Council Vetoes Betray Syrian Victims," May 22, 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/05/22/un-security-council-vetoes-betray-syrian-victims>.

in Darfur, the follow-through has been inconsistent.³⁹ Former Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir remained in power for over a decade after his ICC indictment, and successive Sudanese governments delayed cooperation despite formal commitments.⁴⁰ These dynamics emphasize the structural limitations of legal accountability in the absence of political will.

The Security Council also relies heavily on Secretariat reporting and lacks a consistent framework for coordinating across relevant UN agencies.⁴¹ In situations like Palestine, this has created a disconnect between humanitarian responses and accountability efforts.⁴² The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provides essential services, but holds no mandate to support reconciliation or legal redress.⁴³ Meanwhile, the Human Rights Council and General Assembly have endorsed international investigations, and the ICC has opened proceedings, but without UNSC backing, these mechanisms remain politically vulnerable. This fragmentation reflects a broader pattern of institutional inconsistency and uneven jurisdictional recognition.

But despite these challenges, several models offer insights for more coherent engagement. In the Central African Republic (CAR), the Security Council authorized the deployment of MINUSCA, a peacekeeping mission with an explicit mandate to support ICC investigations.⁴⁴ This coordination between peacekeeping and legal accountability has enabled localized enforcement and protection for witnesses, illustrating the potential for hybrid models that blend international and domestic frameworks.⁴⁵ The International Residual Mechanism for

³⁹ United Nations, “Security Council Refers Situation in Darfur, Sudan, to the ICC,” March 31, 2005, <https://press.un.org/en/2005/sc8351.doc.htm>.

⁴⁰ International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), *The ICC and Sudan: Questions & Answers*, <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/Africa/sudan/the-icc-and-sudan-questions-answers>.

⁴¹ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

⁴² Security Council Report, “Briefing on the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA),” *What’s in Blue*, January 2025, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/01/briefing-on-the-un-relief-and-works-agency-for-palestine-refugees-in-the-near-east-unrwa.php>.

⁴³ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, “United Nations Security Council Press Statement on the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA),” UNRWA, October 30, 2024, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/united-nations-security-council-press-statement-united-nations-relief-and-works-agency-for-palestine-refugees-in-the-near-east-unrwa>.

⁴⁴ United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in the Central African Republic (MINUSCA), “Mandate,” MINUSCA, accessed July 2025, <https://minusca.unmissions.org/en/mandate>.

⁴⁵ International Peace Institute, *Protection and Justice: The Security Council’s Role in Supporting ICC Investigations through Peacekeeping* (IPI, 2021), <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/IPI-E-RPT-Protection-Justice-ICC.pdf>.

Criminal Tribunals (IRMCT) provides another potential model: leaner in scope, institutionally focused, and designed for long-term sustainability.⁴⁶

In Palestine, however, no such model exists. The Security Council has never formally recognized accountability mechanisms, despite its historical involvement in the region's partition.⁴⁷ The resulting vacuum has left investigations vulnerable to political pressure, while limiting the UN's ability to facilitate reconciliation.

By contrast, Ukraine has seen a remarkable proliferation of accountability initiatives outside the Security Council framework. Domestic courts, the ICC, the ICC-supported Joint Investigation Team, and a coalition-led Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression (established in June 2025) illustrate a comprehensive “accountability ecosystem” – a multi-level network of legal, institutional, and political mechanisms working in parallel to investigate, prosecute, and document international crimes.⁴⁸ These efforts, backed by the General Assembly, national jurisdictions, and regional bodies, offer promising lessons for future Security Council engagement, particularly in politically sensitive or actively contested contexts.

The Security Council must now confront the implications of its uneven record. As Member States and civil society actors increasingly turn to hybrid tribunals, regional mechanisms, or “just-in-time” justice strategies deployed during active conflict, the traditional model of post-conflict legal redress appears insufficient. Balancing national ownership with international legal standards will require stronger interagency coordination, clearer mandates, and more adaptable tools. Without structural reforms, the Security Council risks further marginalization in global justice efforts – ceding its authority to ad hoc coalitions, parallel institutions, and reactive diplomacy.

Conclusion:

Transitional justice is widely recognized as essential to long-term peace and institutional recovery. The Security Council's ability to advance it, however, is often constrained by structural

⁴⁶ United Nations Security Council, *Progress Report on the International Residual Mechanism for Criminal Tribunals*, S/2021/955 (November 16, 2021), <https://www.irmct.org/sites/default/files/documents/211116-irmct-progress-report-S-2021-955-en.pdf>.

⁴⁷ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, “The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty,” UNISPAL, <https://unispal.un.org/pdfs/UNRWABART.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Amnesty International, “Ukraine: Establishment of the Special Tribunal for the Crime of Aggression Must Ensure Victims-Centered Justice,” May 14, 2025, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/05/ukraine-establishment-of-the-special-tribunal-for-the-crime-of-aggression-must-ensure-victims-centered-justice/>.

barriers and geopolitical divisions. As the international landscape becomes increasingly polarized, the Security Council's traditional mechanisms, like tribunal referrals or post-conflict interventions, have faced scrutiny for their inconsistency, selective enforcement, and declining legitimacy.⁴⁹

At the same time, expectations for global justice are shifting. New accountability efforts are emerging outside the Security Council's framework, driven by regional organizations, hybrid models, domestic courts, and grassroots initiatives. These developments suggest a broader transformation in how justice is pursued in post-conflict settings: one that emphasizes adaptability, contextual legitimacy, and shared responsibility.⁵⁰

Moving forward, the Security Council can play a more effective role not by replicating past models, but coordinating justice strategies that are politically viable, locally grounded, and institutionally supported. This could include mandating specialized agencies like the IRMCT, supporting hybrid tribunals, or fostering stronger cooperation across UN bodies to integrate legal, humanitarian, and peacebuilding priorities. In high-stakes contexts such as Palestine and Ukraine, these considerations carry particular weight. Justice, in this context, is not a static endpoint but a process that must balance legal standards, political realities, and the lived experiences of affected communities.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can the Security Council balance the competing imperatives of national reconciliation and legal accountability without undermining either goal?
2. What role should the Security Council play when permanent members use their veto power to block justice efforts, particularly in cases involving their strategic allies or interests?
3. How can the Security Council ensure that the needs and perspectives of victims and marginalized communities are meaningfully integrated into transitional justice efforts?
4. To what extent should transitional justice processes be nationally led versus internationally mandated?

⁴⁹ Security Council Report, *Transitional Justice: Report No. 1*.

⁵⁰ António Guterres, "Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes."

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II. Threats to International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is responsible for addressing threats that defy traditional definitions of warfare, like cyberattacks, disinformation campaigns, the weaponization of artificial intelligence (AI), and the use of autonomous drones by non-state actors.⁵¹ The Security Council's mandate to respond to evolving threats gives it both the authority and responsibility to engage with the geopolitical and humanitarian consequences of AI proliferation.

Recent developments have heightened the urgency of this task. In December 2024, the Security Council convened its first high-level briefing on AI, marking a turning point in formal recognition of the issue. The Secretary-General has described AI as an “existential risk” in the absence of global guardrails and has proposed multilateral initiatives including a High-Level Advisory Body and a Global Scientific Panel. These bodies are intended to guide governance efforts by developing international norms, recommending regulatory frameworks, promoting transparency in AI development, and ensuring that security risks are addressed through coordinated, science-informed policymaking.⁵² But despite growing momentum, the UNSC has not issued any binding resolutions, leaving a regulatory void. As AI continues to magnify geopolitical disparities, disrupt peacekeeping operations, and complicate norms of accountability, the Security Council must now consider how to confront AI's dual role as both a security threat and a potential tool for peace.

Statement of the Issue:

⁵¹ Security Council Report, “Artificial Intelligence: High-Level Briefing,” *What's in Blue*, December 18, 2024, <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2024/12/artificial-intelligence-high-level-briefing.php>.

⁵² United Nations, “Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence, Security Council Briefing,” *UN Press*, December 18, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15946.doc.htm>.

Artificial intelligence is an active and escalating force in global security. From autonomous weapons and surveillance regimes to synthetic media and algorithm-driven disinformation, AI technologies are transforming the conduct of war, diplomacy, and peacekeeping. Simultaneously, AI is disrupting global labor markets, reshaping economies, and amplifying inequality – adding new layers of instability that compound existing security threats. Unlike prior technological advances, AI systems are dual-use, rapidly scalable, and often decentralized – making them difficult to trace, govern, or contain within traditional arms control frameworks.

Competing national interests have led to divergent visions of AI governance. Many Western states emphasize transparency, human oversight, and ethical design, while others prioritize state control, data sovereignty, or rapid innovation without constraint.⁵³ At the same time, non-state actors, including cybercriminals and terrorist networks, have begun leveraging open-source tools and generative models to spread disinformation, disrupt digital infrastructure, and manipulate public perception.⁵⁴ These tactics have had tangible political consequences, including alleged foreign interference in democratic elections. For example, some U.S. officials and analysts have cited China's influence on social media platforms as contributing to widespread mistrust in the 2020 U.S. election outcome, fueling societal unrest and straining international relations.⁵⁵ Such activities often bypass existing international legal structures and challenge the Security Council's enforcement mechanisms.

The Security Council's silence on these developments has arguably contributed to a growing governance vacuum. Although the Secretary-General has taken notable steps to elevate the issue, launching the High-Level Advisory Body on AI and advocating for a science-based global governance model, the Security Council has yet to establish binding norms or formal oversight tools.⁵⁶ As AI technologies become increasingly prominent in sanctions monitoring, surveillance, and peace operations, the absence of clear guidelines risks undermining both operational legitimacy and global stability.⁵⁷

⁵³ United Nations, "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence, Security Council Briefing."

⁵⁴ Security Council Report, "Artificial Intelligence: High-Level Briefing."

⁵⁵ James Pearson and Raphael Satter, "U.S. Voters Targeted by Chinese Influence Online, Researchers Say," *Reuters*, September 3, 2024, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-voters-targeted-by-chinese-influence-online-researchers-say-2024-09-03/>.

⁵⁶ United Nations, "About the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence," <https://www.un.org/en/ai-advisory-body>.

⁵⁷ Associated Press, "UN Experts Urge United Nations to Lay Foundations for Global Governance of Artificial Intelligence," *AP News*, September 20, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/un-artificial-intelligence-global-governance-risks-benefits>.

Critical dimensions of this issue demand immediate attention: the militarization of AI through lethal autonomous weapons systems (LAWS), the erosion of information integrity due to deepfakes and automated propaganda, the increasing use of AI by non-state actors in cyber and hybrid warfare, and the institutional gap between rapid innovation and international norm-setting.⁵⁸ Without proactive engagement, these developments may outpace the Security Council's ability to respond, further weakening multilateral governance in a domain that impacts every aspect of global security.

History:

Early efforts to govern AI emerged in the context of technical development and ethical concern, rather than global security. This involved the prioritization of issues like algorithmic transparency, human oversight, and bias prevention. Prior to 2020, most international engagement with AI took place through advisory bodies, civil society initiatives, and educational frameworks. UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence, adopted in 2021 by 193 Member States, marked a milestone in global norm-setting.⁵⁹ It emphasized transparency, human rights, and accountability, but remained non-binding and unenforceable. However, growing concern from academic and civil society actors warned that AI's rapid militarization and misuse could soon pose systemic risks to peace and security. These warnings remained largely peripheral to formal multilateral security debates.⁶⁰

By 2021, United Nations leadership began to acknowledge the broader implications of AI. The Secretary-General increasingly flagged artificial intelligence as a potential threat to global peace, urging Member States to take coordinated action. Under the Geneva-based Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), the UN Office for Disarmament Affairs (UNODA) convened the Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS).⁶¹ Although these discussions were sustained over several years, consensus on a binding treaty did not materialize. In 2023, the Secretary-General launched the

⁵⁸ Security Council Report, "Artificial Intelligence: High-Level Briefing."

⁵⁹ United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence*, 2021, <https://www.unesco.org/en/artificial-intelligence/recommendation-ethics>.

⁶⁰ Marwala, Tshilidzi. "Militarization of AI Has Severe Implications for Global Security and Warfare." *United Nations University*, July 24, 2023. <https://unu.edu/article/militarization-ai-has-severe-implications-global-security-and-warfare>.

⁶¹ United Nations Office for Disarmament Affairs, "Background on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS) – CCW," <https://disarmament.unoda.org/the-convention-on-certain-conventional-weapons/background-on-laws-in-the-ccw/>.

High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence, a system-wide effort to harmonize regulatory initiatives and provide forward-looking recommendations on AI governance.⁶²

Formal engagement by the Security Council began in December 2024, when it held its first high-level briefing on the security implications of artificial intelligence. This meeting marked a turning point in acknowledging AI's relevance to the Security Council's mandate. The briefing (SC/15946) revealed sharp divisions among Member States. Western powers advocated for proactive regulatory frameworks, while Global South representatives emphasized equitable access, digital sovereignty, and concerns over exclusion from standard-setting processes.⁶³ During the session, the Secretary-General proposed the creation of a Global Scientific Panel on AI, modeled after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), to provide expert-driven guidance and scientific assessments of emerging risks.

By 2025, international engagement with AI had expanded through a patchwork of regional and national initiatives. France's AI Action Summit introduced proposals for dual-use technology safeguards, aimed at separating military and civilian applications.⁶⁴ South Korea and the Netherlands co-led the 2023 and 2024 REAIM Summit, which produced a multilateral declaration outlining principles for human oversight and AI non-proliferation in military applications.⁶⁵ Meanwhile, the African Union published its Continental AI Strategy, calling for data sovereignty, regionally grounded governance models, and ethical frameworks adapted to local contexts.⁶⁶ These efforts signal growing momentum, but they also highlight the fragmented nature of AI regulation and the Security Council's limited leadership on the issue. At the same time, AI has become deeply integrated into daily life – shaping education systems, healthcare delivery, communication platforms, and decision-making processes across sectors. The rapid pace of development has outpaced regulatory capacity, and the ethics of AI remain a subject of global debate, particularly given the uncertainty surrounding its long-term societal impacts.

⁶² United Nations, "About the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Advisory Body on Artificial Intelligence."

⁶³ United Nations, "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence, Security Council Briefing," *UN Press* (SC/15946), December 18, 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15946.doc.htm>.

⁶⁴ Paris Peace Forum, *The PPF's Guide to the AI Action Summit* (February 2025), <https://parispeaceforum.org/app/uploads/2025/02/the-ppfs-guide-to-the-ai-action-summit-4-1.pdf>.

⁶⁵ Government of the Netherlands and Republic of Korea, "Towards Responsible AI in the Military Domain (REAIM)," September 4, 2024, <https://www.netherlandsandyou.nl/web/south-korea/w/towards-responsible-ai-in-military-domain>.

⁶⁶ African Union, *Continental Artificial Intelligence Strategy* (adopted July 18-19, 2024), https://au.int/sites/default/files/documents/44004-doc-EN-Continental_AI_Strategy_July_2024.pdf.

Analysis:

The Security Council's engagement with AI remains limited, and not because of a lack of awareness, but persistent structural and political barriers. Chief among them is the absence of consensus among the five permanent members (P5). While Western states have pushed for frameworks centered on human rights, transparency, and ethical AI use, others, including Russia and China, have resisted what they characterize as Western-led norm-setting efforts that may restrict sovereign technological development.⁶⁷ These divisions have prevented any unified response, even as AI's relevance to global security becomes increasingly apparent.

AI's dual-use nature further complicates governance. The same tools that enable humanitarian mapping or climate forecasting can be rapidly reconfigured for autonomous targeting systems, surveillance operations, or coordinated disinformation campaigns.⁶⁸ The line between innovation and weaponization is often indistinct, and most international agreements have struggled to adapt to this complexity. Unlike the nuclear or chemical arms regimes, no binding infrastructure exists to regulate AI-based weapons, deepfakes, or machine-generated information warfare.

The dominance of private sector actors presents a growing challenge to international governance. Companies like OpenAI, Microsoft, and Palantir have developed models with military and surveillance applications that can now operate beyond the direct control of states. In 2023, Microsoft partnered with the U.S. Department of Defense to supply AI capabilities for battlefield decision-making under its Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) initiative,⁶⁹ while Palantir continued to expand its role in defense intelligence systems across NATO member states.⁷⁰ In Israel, generative AI tools were reportedly used to assist in target identification and strike coordination during the Gaza conflict, raising concerns about the speed and opacity of machine-assisted wartime decision-making.⁷¹ The IDF's "Lavender" system flagged around 37,000 Palestinian men as potential Hamas operatives, processing enormous

⁶⁷ United Nations, "Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence, Security Council Briefing."

⁶⁸ Security Council Report, "Artificial Intelligence: High-Level Briefing."

⁶⁹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) Strategy*, March 17, 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/17/2002958406/-1/-1/1/SUMMARY-OF-THE-JOINT-ALL-DOMAIN-COMMAND-AND-CONTROL-STRATEGY.pdf>.

⁷⁰ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, "NATO Acquires AI-Enabled Warfighting System," SHAPE, April 2025, <https://shape.nato.int/news-archive/2025/nato-acquires-ai-enabled-warfighting-system>.

⁷¹ Daniel B. Graeff, "Gaza, Ukraine and the Rise of AI Warfare," *Time*, April 15, 2024, <https://time.com/7202584/gaza-ukraine-ai-warfare/>.

volumes of data with minimal human oversight and sometimes authorizing strikes with only seconds of review.⁷² Critics have warned that the system's statistical nature and high error rates risked misidentifying civilians, violating the principles of distinction and proportionality under international humanitarian law. Such problems are compounded when machine-generated target lists are approved collectively, effectively outsourcing life-and-death decisions to algorithms. These developments illustrate how private entities are shaping the global security environment ahead of regulatory consensus, while the Security Council currently lacks mechanisms to hold them accountable under international law.

Autonomous weapons, in particular, reflect the failure of existing governance channels. The Group of Governmental Experts (GGE) on Lethal Autonomous Weapons Systems (LAWS), convened under the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons (CCW), has debated regulatory proposals since 2017 with no binding outcome.⁷³ In the absence of agreement, several states, including the United States, Russia, and Israel, have developed or tested AI-enabled weapons systems capable of selecting and engaging targets without direct human oversight. For instance, Turkey's use of the Kargu-2 drone in Libya reportedly marked one of the earliest autonomous strikes conducted without real-time human input.⁷⁴ Despite growing alarm from civil society groups and UN officials, the Security Council has yet to take formal action. Without binding restrictions, these technologies risk eroding foundational principles of international humanitarian law, including the requirements of distinction and proportionality in the use of force.

Information integrity has emerged as another critical front in modern conflict. AI-generated media – deepfakes, algorithmic propaganda, and generative images – played a prominent role in Ukraine and the 2023-2024 Gaza escalation. In March 2022, a deepfake video falsely showed President Zelenskyy urging troops to surrender, spreading widely through social media and hijacked TV systems before being debunked.⁷⁵ During the Gaza crisis, AI-manipulated images of injured children circulated rapidly, intensifying emotional responses and

⁷² Bethan McKernan and Quieke Kierszenbaum, "Israel Used AI to Generate Targets in Gaza, Sources Say," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/apr/03/israel-gaza-ai-database-hamas-airstrikes>.

⁷³ Michael C. Horowitz and Sarah E. Sollenberger, "The Kargu-2 Autonomous Attack Drone: Legal and Ethical Implications," *Lieber Institute West Point*, June 2023, <https://lieber.westpoint.edu/kargu-2-autonomous-attack-drone-legal-ethical/>.

⁷⁴ Michael C. Horowitz and Sarah E. Sollenberger, "The Kargu-2 Autonomous Attack Drone: Legal and Ethical Implications."

⁷⁵ Tom Gara, "Inside the Kremlin's Year of Ukraine Propaganda," *Time*, May 2023, <https://time.com/6257372/russia-ukraine-war-disinformation/>.

undermining trust.⁷⁶ South Korea's 2024 legislative elections also saw a spike in deepfake manipulation: the National Election Commission detected over 100 AI-generated videos and images that violated election laws in just a two-week period.⁷⁷ But despite these alarming trends, the Security Council has no rapid-response mechanism or formal mandate to verify or address synthetic content. Peacekeeping missions still lack guidance on managing digital disinformation, even as AI-enabled manipulation disrupts democracies and social cohesion worldwide.

Non-state actors are also increasingly central to the AI security landscape. Armed groups, criminal networks, and cyber militias have begun using publicly available tools for surveillance evasion, financial fraud, and destabilization campaigns.⁷⁸ These actors operate beyond the reach of conventional arms control regimes and often exploit jurisdictional gaps to avoid detection. The FBI reports that generative AI deepens the sophistication and reach of fraud – ranging from voice and image forgery to automated spear-phishing – activities beyond existing arms-control frameworks.⁷⁹ For peacekeeping mandates and sanctions enforcement mechanisms to remain effective, they must adapt to the growing sophistication and decentralization of digital threats.

Evidently, the current debate focuses heavily on military AI regulation, but some Member States have suggested the need for demilitarization frameworks. Analogous to nuclear-free zones, regional agreements on AI non-proliferation or ethical usage could emerge in areas where trust and coordination are higher.⁸⁰ For instance, the ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics offers a non-binding model of regional standardization, and the African Union's Continental AI Strategy emphasizes locally relevant ethics, sovereignty, and regional governance.⁸¹ Within the AU, countries like Rwanda and Ghana have started drafting national AI policies that align with the Strategy's emphasis on inclusion and equitable development. In 2023, Ghana's Ministry of Communications and Digitalisation partnered with the UNDP to develop an

⁷⁶ Associated Press, "AI-created deepfakes of Israel-Hamas war is fueling alarm," *AP News*, November 28, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/artificial-intelligence-hamas-israel-misinformation-ai-gaza-a1bb303b637ffbbb9cbc3aa1e000db47>.

⁷⁷ OECD, "AI-Generated Deepfakes Disrupt South Korean Elections and Target Public Opinion," *OECD.AI*, February 20, 2024, <https://oecd.ai/en/incidents/2024-02-15-7651>.

⁷⁸ Security Council Report, "Artificial Intelligence: High-Level Briefing."

⁷⁹ Steven L. Hall, "FBI: Criminals Using AI to Commit Fraud on a Larger Scale," *SearchSecurity* (TechTarget), May 2025, <https://www.techtarget.com/searchsecurity/news/366616605/FBI-Criminals-using-AI-to-commit-fraud-on-a-larger-scale>.

⁸⁰ Emma Klein and Stewart Patrick, *Envisioning a Global Regime Complex to Govern Artificial Intelligence* (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 21, 2024), <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/envisioning-a-global-regime-complex-to-govern-artificial-intelligence?lang=en>.

⁸¹ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics* (January 2024), https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics_beautified_201223_v2.pdf.

ethical AI framework tailored to education and healthcare,⁸² while Rwanda has piloted AI-driven public health tools with a strong focus on privacy and human rights.⁸³ These efforts suggest that ethical regional models, though non-binding, can serve as precursors to more formal demilitarization or non-proliferation agreements in the AI space.

A deeper structural gap is the absence of a global oversight agency for AI. Unlike nuclear energy (IAEA), aviation (ICAO), or climate change (IPCC), AI lacks a permanent international institution for scientific assessment and policy guidance.⁸⁴ The Secretary-General's proposed Global Scientific Panel on AI, modeled after the IPCC, aims to fill this void – but remains purely advisory, without legal authority or enforcement mechanisms.⁸⁵ Without institutional backing, even high-level recommendations risk remaining theoretical, limiting their usefulness in shaping coherent, enforceable global policy.

Taken together, these challenges point to a clear tension between universal norms and technological sovereignty. The U.S. and European Union continue to promote “human-centered” AI standards grounded in transparency and explainability.⁸⁶ Yet many countries view these standards as exclusionary, rooted in specific legal cultures, and reflective of the very power imbalances that AI could help mitigate.⁸⁷ Calls for more inclusive governance models – ones that reflect local priorities, regional capacities, and diverse approaches to innovation – have grown stronger, especially across the Global South. For any AI governance model to succeed, it must account for these geopolitical realities and strike a balance between enforceability, equity, and flexibility.

Conclusion:

Artificial intelligence is actively reshaping the landscape of war, peace, and global security. From autonomous weapons systems to algorithmic disinformation, AI is influencing how conflicts are fought, how information is weaponized, and how state and non-state power is

⁸² Digital Watch Observatory, “Ghana’s National Artificial Intelligence Strategy (2023-2033),” February 2023, <https://dig.watch/resource/ghanas-national-artificial-intelligence-strategy-2023-2033>.

⁸³ World Economic Forum, “Data Access to Healthcare in Rwanda,” March 2022, <https://www.weforum.org/impact/data-access-to-healthcare-in-rwanda/>.

⁸⁴ Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), *Expanded ASEAN Guide on AI Governance and Ethics – Generative AI* (January 2025), <https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Expanded-ASEAN-Guide-on-AI-Governance-and-Ethics-Generative-AI.pdf>.

⁸⁵ António Guterres, “Remarks to the Security Council on the Role of Reconciliation Processes.”

⁸⁶ United Nations, “Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence, Security Council Briefing.”

⁸⁷ United Nations, “Maintenance of International Peace and Security: Artificial Intelligence, Security Council Briefing.”

exercised. Yet, global governance remains fragmented, reactive, and politically polarized. The Security Council has acknowledged these risks, but has yet to define its role in a domain outpacing the institutions meant to govern it.

As regional frameworks and advisory bodies move forward with their own models, the Security Council is at a crossroads. Its existing tools – peacekeeping, sanctions, referrals – must be adapted to meet AI-enabled threats that often fall outside conventional state-based conflict. At the same time, efforts to govern AI must be grounded in transparency, scientific expertise, and inclusive norm-building, not dictated by technological advantage or geopolitical rivalry. Whether through binding frameworks, support for scientific panels, or coordination with regional strategies, the UNSC’s future engagement will help determine whether artificial intelligence reinforces global stability, or accelerates its erosion.

Questions to Consider:

1. How can the Security Council engage with dual-use AI technologies that blur the line between civilian and military applications?
2. How can the Security Council promote inclusive and equitable AI governance without reinforcing existing geopolitical inequalities?
3. In conflicts where AI is used to enable targeted killings or algorithmic surveillance, what mechanisms could the Security Council use to ensure compliance with international humanitarian law?
4. How can peacekeeping missions be adapted to address AI-enabled threats such as automated propaganda, cyber manipulation, or autonomous drones?

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