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PERMANENT MEMBERSHIP IN THE UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL AS AN IDENTITY-BASED OBSTACLE TO EFFECTIVE CONFLICT RESOLUTION

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This article examines how the permanent membership of five states in the UN Security Council creates identity dynamics that obstruct its capacity to resolve conflicts. It argues that the status gap between permanent and rotating members produces entrenched identities that legitimise privilege and generate persistent tension. Using a constructivist approach, it analyses debates related to three major conflicts between 2014 and 2020. The findings show that permanent states defend their status through moralised identity-performances to justify obstruction even when material interests are only indirectly involved, eroding the Council's legitimacy and contributing to recurrent paralysis, creating an identity-based obstacle to effective conflict resolution.
Key words: Security Council, conflict resolution, identity, constructivism, security governance
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1 INTRODUCTION

The Security Council has faced various problems over the years, with its Structure, Legitimacy and Power being contested from multiple angles. The goal of this paper is to go beyond the specific issues and attempt to examine the underlying contradictions at the core of the Council, which stem from the exclusive permanence which several powerful states have. The approach taken is a constructivist one, exploring the identity-based contradictions that create constant tension in the Council, and which stem from the identity of the permanent states as great power arbiters whose national interests are inherently superior to those of other states. The inequality of states in the

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Council undermines its normative power as it allows great powers to instrumentalise it for their own benefit, identifying with their roles to the extent that they refuse any reform, while blocking any conflict resolution solutions that would harm their interests, which they justify by their identity and role. The article explores how these permanent states play out their identities and by doing so harm the Council's functioning and create a difficult atmosphere for the resolution of international disputes. The interests of permanent states are shaped by their status and identity given to them by their role in the Council, and they reify their identities by manifesting their dominance in the Council meetings. The contradiction is that their identities rely upon the legitimacy of the Council, which they undermine by their actions. The role-identity approach and examination through discourse goes beyond traditional approaches to great power rivalry in the Council. Thus the research question is whether permanent membership in the Security Council produces identity dynamics that systematically obstruct effective conflict resolution, and how these appear in Council discourse during acute crises.

The article uses a comparative case study of several processes of attempted conflict resolution in the Council in relation to some of the most acute crises in recent times, the conflicts in Ukraine, Syria, and between Israel and Palestine. It integrates the identity-based discourse in Council debates, in order to explore the relations between the permanent states themselves, and their relations towards the non-permanent states. The goal of this is to explore whether the status of exclusive permanence, and the identification of states with this status and its resultant role, is the main underlying cause for the limitation of the Council's efficiency in conflict resolution. The identity of a great power, coupled with the status of permanence and the resulting power in the Council, leads these states to overuse their powers to the extent that the rest of the UN members increase their contestation of their status, especially during excessive overuse and acute crises which require resolution.

The Council was created as a forum for mediation and consultation, but it is nowadays expected to be an instrument of conflict resolution in relation to peace and security. Whether it can be both effectively at the same time is an open question, especially as its structure is significantly anachronistic, and as permanent states derive authority and base their identities on the power they derive from it as it is. The article is divided into three parts. The first reviews the literature related to the main issues related to the Council, those being Structure, Legitimacy, and Reform, and does so by examining the issues historically and through the lens of identity. The second part provides a theoretical framework based on constructivism in order to be able to examine interests as related to identity and as manifested in discourse. This is followed by an empirical analysis and a discussion of results.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In order to examine identity and discourse, as well as the interpretation of the process of attempted conflict resolution by the participants, the article relies on conventional constructivism, using a traditional theory with a new approach. If following Wendt's view that the fundamental structures of international politics are social instead of material and that these structures shape the identities and interests of states as well as their behaviour (Wendt, 1995), as well as the the position that identities are intersubjective and therefore continually evolve (Wendt, 1994), the Council's legitimacy and authority are then constantly constituted through its activity, with the roles the members have then affecting their identities and interests individually and collectively. As the international system has a social nature, its constituent states are continually producing and reproducing its rules and norms (Guzzini, 2000), and if the position of Hopf is taken that agency and structure are mutually constituted so that identity can be intersubjectively changed (Hopf, 1998), the unequal power distribution in the Council would give the permanent states a power to affect not only the policies but identities of non-permanent states, which they would be unwilling to abjure. Norms are essential to the process, as they influence behaviour in a community such that its members are socialised by internalising these norms.

These identities allow for the existence of at least a minimal level of predictability and order, even while being constantly reconstituted through action and perception. The exclusive permanence would then be constantly reconstituting and reifying itself through norms and behaviour that is socialised on the non-permanent states, necessitating a continuation to maintain the benefits to their identity. The power relations in the Council shape how issues are framed and debated, and which norms are spread and which prevented from being diffused, giving the permanent states a mechanism of protecting their great power identity against challenges such as calls for reform. If all actions by states in the system affect their identities and the perception of the selfsame by others, which then directly affect their interests (Wendt, 1992), then the permanent states would be cautious to protect their positions and status against any attempt, even to the detriment of conflict resolution. The paper argues that the identity of the permanent states is the key to understanding their behaviour and the behaviour of other states in the Council towards them, and that the protection of the identity against reform is an underlying cause of the Council's inability to perform reliable conflict resolution in relation to crises and security breaches, due to the contradictions and tension it creates between permanent and non-permanent members.

The identity of a superior state would incentivise the permanent states to overuse their powers in an unfair way so that they protect their interests, justifying it by their importance to the international system, which is justified by their permanent status. The analysis follows how decisions and discourse in the Council unfold over time and lead to specific outcomes which prevent the conflict resolution role for the sake of maintenance

of the great power identity for the permanent states, exploring how identity is protected to the detriment of the Council's functioning and how non-permanent member reactions to it undermine the foundation for the identity. The argument is that the structure of the Council creates inequality due to an identity hierarchy, which undermines its legitimacy and leads to blocking of the conflict resolution and security governance role, which then leads to calls for reform which is resisted because it threatens those identities. The greater importance of national interests and the desire to retain their great power identity should lead the permanent states to limit and undermine their conflict resolution role in order to assert their power and status, leading them to overuse the powers that the Council gives them to protect both their interests directly, and their status indirectly, through the use of the status-defining powers and double standards, resisting all criticism and challenge. Precisely because identities are evolving through dynamic interaction, the permanent states refuse contestation of their authority, so that the power asymmetry stabilises their identities and makes them resistant to change.

3 METHODS

The analysis consists of qualitative comparative case studies of the Council deliberations on three major crises between 2014 and 2020, those being Ukraine, Syria and Israel-Palestine, examining the process and discourse related to failed conflict resolution over time. These were the most significant acute but lasting problems the Council was seized of during the period. Process and discourse are analysed concurrently as they are mutually dependent, as the analysis explores whether the discourse changes over time in reaction to the development of the process of attempted conflict resolution and security governance in relation to these acute crises. Discursive strategies and procedural actions are examined to provide insight into identity-protecting behaviour and the protection of status to the detriment of Council functioning. The period was chosen due to the unique character of having three concurrent crises which were related to the national interests of the permanent states but did not acutely endanger those interests. Tension was high during these years, along with increased calls for reform and activity of the non-permanent members. The sources consist of the minutes of Council debates, examining each debate concerning the three specific cases over the period.

Challenges are examined both within the permanent states, and between them and the non-permanent ones, taking into account the coalitions that certain permanent states have with non-permanent ones. Identity performance was operationalised through recurrent status and role claims in which speakers invoked permanent prerogatives, special responsibility, or historical authority, in order to legitimate their positions, which is expected t obe framed in moralised terms related to sovereignty and guardianship. Identity contestation was operationalised through explicit challenges to veto legitimacy and Council credibility, as well as references to Charter-based responsibility and accountability and calls for reform or veto restraint. The processes of failed conflict

resolution are connected to identity-relevant discourse which appears in relation to the perceived failures. The comparative analysis of the cases allows for commonalities of Council dysfunction and contesting discourse in them. Indicators of identity protection include references of the permanent states to their status and their justification of their use of veto powers in relation to their interests based on their status and identity. It is also expected that the use of veto powers would increase the disruption and consternation by other permanent states, as well as status contestation and critiques of effectiveness by non-permanent states, but that in each case this challenge to legitimacy would be deflected by the permanent states as their status and identity are more significant to them than conflict resolution, with only the excuses changing.

4 THE COUNCIL'S STRUCTURE, LEGITIMACY, AND REFORM IN RELATION TO IDENTITY

After the end of the Cold War the Council has developed its role in conflict resolution in line with its increased role in global governance, especially due to its ability to create an environment that shapes norms, yet its unequal structure provides a problem for this role (Barnett and Finnemore, 1999). The role of the UN has increased despite its heterogeneous nature and critiques aimed at it, as it remains the most legitimate international organisation, which has even achieved a symbolic and ethical role in international politics due to its unique universality and authority (Barnett, 1997), The UN forms the most effective normative structure for the international order, and its role in global governance and conflict resolution has increased with the expansion of multilateralism which characterised the period (Ruggie, 1992), and it is based on the Council as the only institution which can make binding decisions in the name of the international community (Caron, 1993).

The Council has been providing a collective global identity and a soft authority, giving a limited kind of norm based governance in the international system, and it retains significant influence in international politics, especially through mutual regulation (Voeten, 2005). Even non-permanent membership in the Council provides both real and symbolic power and authority, which is derived from the legitimacy of the institution, no matter the unequal position vis a vis the permanent states (Hurd, 2002). Ruggie warned that the system can allow for the permanent states to have a narrow multilateralism that excludes other states, incentivising them to perpetuate the structure (Ruggie, 1992). The two groups are then defined in opposition ot each other, and their struggle for influence and for legitimacy is part of the underlying structure of the Council and one of the longstanding obstacles to its efficient functioning.

As the permanent members never change, the agenda inevitably reflects their interests, often leaving others dissatisfied and excluded, and causing them to call for reform or to align themselves with permanent states as protectors of their interests. This has led the Council to extend its definition of what constitutes a threat to peace and

security to accept a much larger number of cases, expanding the power and influence of the permanent members (Hassler, 2015). This expansion is in their interest and it serves to increase their legitimacy and strengthen their role, which over a long period should lead them to connect their identity to the role and guard it despite inefficiency. In relation to this, Howard and Dayal propose that the Council's power to authorise force is done not only for the sake of a current goal such as peacekeeping, but for its own sake in order to preserve its authority, with the permanent members acting as an identity group.

Each authorisation of force thereby strengthens the collective legitimacy of the Council, which is in the interest of all permanent members (Howard and Dayal, 2018). The authority and identity gained by the status allows these states greater leverage in the Council, but also to act outside of the Council to achieve favourable outcomes in multilateral bargaining (Voeten, 2005). This identity gains the states benefits which they would seek to protect despite decreased Council functioning, and it incentivised them to attempt to expand the Council's role in international politics (Bosco, 2014). This means that the identity of a permanent state should be more important to these states than the role of conflict resolution, or any reform that would increase efficiency or legitimacy.

Criticism against the Council's structure mostly come from the General Assembly, and include a lack of transparency, accountability, and inconsistency in applying moral and legal principles, as well as the domination and abuse of power by the permanent states (Binder and Heupel, 2015). The resolutions it produces maintain the stable identities of the permanent members, yet there is disappointment with practical results which motivates the critique from the Assembly and leads to demands for its increased role to the Council's detriment (Carswell, 2013). This is consistent with the Council's main institutional function of preventing conflict, which necessitates action (Buchanan and Keohane 2004), which, as Voeten notices, allows for collective legitimization through the organisation, which receives direct power to influence the policies of states (Voeten, 2005).

As powers can be abused in the Council, criticism for abuse is mostly related to the substantial veto power which is used at critical moments, yet the permanent states also have procedural advantages which come out of experience, and can delay issues beyond the two year terms non-permanent states get. The permanent states often act as a group in order to preserve their status when their national interests are not affected (Langmore and Farrall, 2016). They have advantages over all other members as they are constantly engaged with all matters of international security, often failing to provide honest explanations for their major decisions like the use of veto, which is often abused in order to protect an ally. The use of privileges for national gain despite criticism undermines the Council's role in providing stability in the long term (Wouters and Ruys, 2005). These create a clear role and identity differentiation for the permanent states, which allows them to avoid accountability and maintain influence.

Being the final decision makers increases their prestige, privilege and relevance in relation to other states, giving them an added reason to avoid structural reform (Howard and Dayal, 2018). Voeten characterises the permanent members as a "concert of powers" (Voeten, 2005), which Bosco concurs with, adding that it continues to function as a diplomatic forum of powers rather than as an instrument of governance (Bosco, 2014). Cronin described a duality in the UN's role as an intergovernmental security-oriented organisation and its transnational role of promoting the common good (Cronin, 2002). Berdal considers that even with the inherent dysfunction of the Council that often leads states to take unilateral action, it retained its indispensable character, yet warns that this does not mean that it achieves good governance (Berdal, 2003) This adds to both the argument of the permanent members deriving group and individual identity from their privileges, and the Council's current structure being unsuitable for effective conflict resolution in line with its global governance role due to its power asymmetry.

Another issue is that the international power structures have changed significantly since the Council was formed, yet it is still expected to authorise legitimate collective action despite the power inequality between the members (Caron, 1993). Even so, the permanent members rejected all proposed reforms (Sarwar, 2011). Legitimacy is required for the functioning of the Council as its decisions have the power to compel, yet another purpose of legitimacy is for its actions to be obeyed voluntarily rather than challenged (Voeten, 2005). The enactment of Council powers relies on compliance and support from other states which is related to legitimacy, giving the permanent states power even though their superior status harms legitimacy (Hurd, 2002), meaning that the status and identity the permanent states derive from the Council at the same time undermines their position, especially when instrumentalised through enactment, as the perception of their status by non-permanent members affects their legitimacy.

These critiques generally concern the status and power of the permanent states, which despite arguments refuse reform, yet as they have the power to veto each other their resistance might not be only based on practical and power-related matters but also to their identity as leading states. When their national interests are not threatened the permanent states cooperate to perform their governance role in accordance with their role, with approval from the membership (Howard and Dayal, 2018). Among them, China has generally been sceptical and cautious towards authorising force (Medeiros and Fravel, 2003), as it sought to increase the legitimacy of the Council even if it leads to a lack of Council action (Wuthnow, 2010). However a lack of action often causes consternation and tension in the Council and Assembly and increases calls for reform (Carswell, 2013). This torpidity bolsters the calls for expansion, especially in the Assembly, and thus increases discontent among the membership (Afoaku and Ukaga, 2001), yet the various candidates for permanent status wish to deny the same status to their rivals, as otherwise the increase would have to be large, so that these states generally have to be satisfied with non-permanent membership (Blum, 2005).

The discontent has led to states calling for the Assembly to have a greater role in providing peace and security if the Council fails (Schrijver, 2007). The UN Secretariat itself is concerned that if the Council is not seen as legitimate or objective enough, states could circumvent it, but also that expansion would render it less effective (United Nations, 2004).Even so, attempts at reform regularly fail due to rejection from the permanent states which retain authority through their power (Weiss and Young, 2005). This would suggest that the resistance to reform is related to the self-identification of the permanent members as the guardians of international order which they seek to protect primarily, thus reform can be seen as an identity threat. The UN has the role of normative integration of states and the collective legitimization of its members (Barnett, 1997), and with the expansion of the Council's agenda the permanent states now have an even larger responsibility to the organisation as the legitimacy of the body impacts the authority of the institution as a whole (Cronin, 2002). This further sets them apart in status and identity from the other states. In practice, legitimacy is conferred by both practice and discourse, and while negative statements about the Council in the Assembly outnumber the positive ones, it retains its legitimacy due to its legal position and the power of its permanent states (Binder and Heupel, 2015).

The unequal status has led to regular calls for an increase of the role of the Assembly (Morris, 2000), especially in relation to the crisis of legitimacy and concomitant calls for reform due to changing geopolitical conditions (Sarwar, 2011). The legitimacy of the Council can be assessed by whether it addresses the most severe conflicts in the world, rather than simply serving the narrow national interests of the veto powers (Frederking and Patane, 2017), as the membership at large would expect. This would mean that the Council's failure to act in regard to major crises, especially when their interests are affected, would cause the greatest consternation and lead to identity-based challenges to legitimacy and roles. Criticism that undermines the legitimacy is largely directed at the veto power and the lack of expansion of permanent members, and it has led to calls for reform in order to improve the Council's global governance role and remove dysfunctionality (Koskenniemi and Ville, 2020) Such reform would have to be structural rather than just practical, with reform discussions being always related to legitimacy and effectiveness in governance, and critique directed at the permanent members (Winther, 2020).

The non-permanent members have influence on the Council through coalition-building and changing the agenda, using their regional networks and proposing resolutions. Their influence is contextual, however they help stabilise decision-making in a polarised Council and foster multilateralism (Pay and Postolski, 2022). While the non-permanent states cannot determine outcomes in the Council, their support is necessary to legitimize resolutions. This may provide an area for informal reform through practice (Gifkins, 2021). The non-permanent members join permanent ones in coalitions which are aimed at producing global governance in line with the coalition's policies.

Monteleone distinguishes a dominant transatlantic coalition which increasingly competes with a Russia-China axis, and which contributed to greater participation in global governance as states participate in Council debates more (Monteleone, 2015). Gifkins notes that informal practices and negotiations are essential to the conduct of the Council, and that through them the permanent states maintain domination beyond formal rules (Gifkins, 2021). Even with increased participation of non-permanent members, their influence is limited and they rely on the permanent members to support their initiatives, yet through coalitions their criticism is then directed towards certain permanent members for those actions which all permanent members can be accused of.

5 RESULTS

5.1 The case of Ukraine

In the early stages of the Ukraine crisis in 2014 we can observe an example of the Council being unable to perform its crisis resolution and security governance role, with the resolutions it produced being able to simply reaffirm the right of member states to their sovereignty and integrity, calling on all parties to pursue a peaceful resolution of their disputes and exercise restraint while refraining from unilateral action and inflammatory rhetoric. The resolution produced called for accepting international mediation efforts (Security Council, 2014a), yet this fell on deaf ears. As a referendum was held in Crimea, a draft resolution was prepared by western states that accused it of being against the territorial integrity of Ukraine, calling for international law to be respected (Security Council, 2014b). Russia was directly involved in the matter considered, and it blocked the resolution, while its ally China abstained, and this was framed by proponents of the resolution as being an action in clear violation of the charter for the sake of national interests. The Russian discourse provided a clear performance of its great-power identity, relying on its historical continuity and sovereign prerogative to interpret international law.

Russia framed the veto not as obstruction but protection of legitimate interests and of international law, anchoring it in its historical role. The US ambassador, who supported the resolution, relied on his country's identity as a guardian of international law and universal norms, framing Russia as deviant in that regard, also doing so by invoking history and the founding of the UN as a war-preventing organisation. Non-permanent members who supported the resolution engaged in an identity confrontation, positioning themselves as the better protectors of the Council's purpose and value, contrasting the use of the veto against their support for collective rule-based governance and conflict resolution. They complained that the veto closed the window to a diplomatic solution and took the problem out of the Council, preventing the Council from carrying out its responsibility, with some calling for a discussion on Council reform, especially regarding the restriction of the veto power. (Security Council, 2014c).

Pressure was continually mounted in the Council regarding the management of the crisis, while Russia continued to block substantive action and to refuse compromise. The following debates were an opportunity for the powers to protect and perform their respective identities rather than to collectively deliberate as a governance body. Ethical arguments were raised by the US as it framed itself as a responsible Council member and protector of the international order, with the UK and France following along the same line and stressing a moral superiority which legitimised their status in order to avoid the criticism Russia was exposed to. Russian discourse argued that political attacks based on narrow interests were instrumentalised in the Council, protecting its identity as a responsible great power in the face of non-permanent state moral accusations (Security Council, 2014d). Western states and many non-permanent members thus critiqued Russia as an irresponsible member of the Council, providing a challenge

Russian discourse reversed the accusation and rejected moral blame, framing Russia as a sovereign great power acting as a regional stabilizer defending its national interests. It was accused by non-permanent states for its perceived prioritisation of interest over the Council's fulfilling of its charter responsibilities, with condemnation that it ignored its special responsibility related to its permanent status. China maintained caution and urged all sides to remain calm and exercise restraint to avoid any actions that could lead to escalation. It maintained a discursive neutrality while aligning with Russia through actions, in order to maintain its status and identity and prevent any disputation of it even with Council effectiveness deteriorating. (Security Council, 2014e). As each power reasserted moral or legal superiority, identity-protection was prioritised, causing an atmosphere not conducive to the Council achieving its role and causing frustration.

The failure to provide a solution led to a deterioration in the situation in Ukraine and to actions being taken by the permanent states outside of the Council through the Minsk process. After the failure of the initial ceasefire the Council again fell into disarray as the western permanent states invoked moral and legal universality to reassert their collective identity as custodians of international order, while accusing Russia of undermining it. In return Russian discourse asserted its historical position as a great power protecting the international order, while non permanent members aligned with the west used the opportunity to further question the Council's role in light of the perceived blocking of Russia (Security Council, 2015a). Moral polarisation increased and the debates deteriorated into ethical attacks, with Russian discourse accusing its western critics of hysteria, with both sides framing themselves as the responsible and rational great powers working towards dialogue and peace. Non-permanent members demanded compliance with the Charter and accountability of the permanent states to their collective responsibility. (Security Council, 2015b).

After the Minsk 2 agreement was signed there was an uneasy convergence of interests in the Council, both sides framing themselves as responsible powers which create and guarantee peace, justifying their actions as constructive in the end and

expressing mistrust of the other. The non-permanent members expressed cautious optimism, their demands having been partly satisfied with the permanent states performing their expected roles, yet they expressed that was conditional on further success (Security Council, 2015c). As the acute crisis was turning into a chronic one, Council sessions became standardised reiterations of the identities of its members, with the same patterns of accusation and counter-accusation further deteriorating the confidence of the non-permanent states towards the permanent. The permanent states defended their status identity through discourse and action, asserting their moral superiority and action. Non-permanent states were frustrated by the inability for a final resolution of the conflict, criticising permanent members for their division performing role contestation through appeals to collective responsibility and normative alignment with the charter (Security Council, 2015d). Therefore continual obstruction caused a functional prevention of conflict resolution due to the Council's structural form and resulting identity-based disagreement.

The veto was taken as evidence by the western permanent states and their coalition of the prevention of the Council's carrying out of its responsibilities, leading them to use morally charged discourse and framing the Council's role as being also symbolic and related to ethics. Russian discourse was that of a besieged sovereign power responding to politicisation motivated by the strategic interests of its opponents, both sides performing a status and identity defence narrative. China maintained its neutral stabiliser identity, although its discourse leaned towards its ally, while it urged for mutual respect and non-interference rather than the performing of conflict resolution, presenting their passive neutrality as responsible great power conduct. Non-permanent members openly began to dispute the legitimacy of the Council in reference to the overuse of the veto power, holding the permanent members accountable for their power, with several states openly calling for reform and widening the issue from one crisis to the general functioning of the body (Security Council, 2015e).

With a failure of the Council to act the chronic crisis continued, with many breaches of the ceasefire, and an increase of instability in the region. The tension and instability was mirrored in the Council, where a decision remained impossible and the discourse become harsher and filled with more disappointment and mistrust. Four years after the Minsk agreements the debate was ongoing in the same way, with great powers performatively reaffirming their status. The permanent states acted according to their great power interests and prerogatives, one accusing the other of instrumentalising the crisis and presenting themselves as standing up for the stability of the international order. Russia continued to frame its prior use and defence of the veto as an expression of its sovereign great-power identity protecting its interests against western interference, while the western permanent states accused it of using it to protect its national interests to the detriment of international law, performing their collective identity as defenders of international law (Security Council, 2019a). Non permanent states accused the permanent

states of failing to act against a threat to peace, using moral discourse as a form of contestation of the legitimacy of permanence and aligning with a normative universalism based on the charter's goals (Security Council, 2019b; 2020). In this crisis it seemed that the Council remained symbolically authoritative while remaining functionally limited in regard to crisis resolution, as Russia instrumentalised the veto and the debate to defend its interests while framing obstruction as a legitimate expression of great-power responsibility. In doing so it defended its status through identity-performance in justificatory discourse, so that its discourse was contested by opposing states which accused it of obstruction as conflict resolution failed.

5.2 The case of Israel and Palestine

The end of 2014 was marked by another failure of the Council, as Russia and China led six other members of the Council in an attempt to regulate the long-standing Israel-Palestine conflict by calling for the respect for previous Council resolutions regarding Israel's withdrawal from the territories occupied in 1967, demanding that it take place within a year in order to force negotiation and lead to a two state solution.The action was blocked by the US, acting as protector of Israeli interests in the region, claiming that such a resolution would be tantamount to unilateral action, even though it was based on Council resolutions, calling instead for direct negotiations between conflicted sides. The US discourse defended the veto as an act of principled restraint, protecting peace negotiations by delaying them, framing itself as the responsible actor guaranteeing international peace. The veto was also meant to confirm the status of the US by exercising its structural privilege ostensibly for the sake of peace but in actuality for their own strategic interests. The US did not have the full support of its coalition as France and the UK expressed regret and called for a collective approach, while framing themselves as prudent and patient. Russian discourse criticised the US for supposedly monopolising the peace process through preventing a collective approach with the veto.

Non-permanent states criticised the US for putting national interests over those of the international community and preventing conflict resolution. Many expressed frustration with the Council and criticised it on moral grounds, especially those sympathetic to Palestine who framed it as a great disappointment and failure of the Council's role (Security Council, 2014f; 2014g). The US framed the attempt to force a solution as unilateral, demanding direct negotiations between the conflicted sides instead, acting at the same time according to their great power identity and prerogative, and framing themselves as a responsible great power, while obstructing conflict resolution for their national interests. It asserted its authority to decide how international mediation will proceed in spite of the majority view. (Security Council, 2015f; 2015g; 2015h, 2015i). The opposition of non-permanent members to the use of veto power or lack of implementation of previous resolutions leads many of them to criticise the gap between

between discourse and action and expressing frustration with the powers of the permanent states and the functioning of the Council.

As the crisis remained unresolved there was another attempted resolution vetoed by the US, and which called on member states not to establish diplomatic missions in Jerusalem, which was attempted in response to the unilateral decision of the US to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital against international law. The Council was unable to find a solution and was split along identity lines. The decision of the US was criticised as irresponsible, and several non-permanent members explicitly accused the Council of losing relevance due to such unilateral behaviour that undermined the charter's goals and the body's purpose, risking the Council's loss of relevance. As the US was the only vote against with the rest of the Council in favor, their discourse expressed a sovereign exceptionalism and identity defence through the veto, emphasizing that it was a special prerogative used to mark core interests and conducted to protect their sovereignty. This was a departure from their previous critiques of other states using the veto, and translated structural privilege into moralised sovereignty.

In this case it was Russia and China whose discourse defended multilateral legitimacy, and now that Russia's own interests were not directly affected its discourse called for the Council to act collectively, now performing the role of a responsible multilateral power. It also emphasised the need to respect the Council's own resolutions, highlighting the power of the permanent members with those resolutions having been accepted by them previously. Multiple non-permanent states from all over the world used discourse that included sharp normative resistance, challenging the Council's role on account of the veto power and the structure that allowed it, remaining within the institution's framework (Security Council, 2017a; 2017b; 2017c). In this case the veto was defended through moralised claims of responsible restraint and authority over the peace process, showing how the same structural privilege was protected through different identity narratives than in Ukraine depending on which permanent member's interests were implicated.

5.3 The case of Syria

Another example of Council ineffectiveness during this period is the failure to provide a solution for the crisis and conflict in Syria, which had been raging for years. After attempts at peace failed in early 2014, the Council attempted to exercise governance and mediate in the resolution of conflict. The permanent states were again divided, with Russia supporting the Syrian government and blaming western permanent states for supposed interventionism, protecting its ally from censure. The three western permanent states, and the non-permanent states which supported them, who were mostly western states, criticised Russia's actions as a serious challenge to the Council which displayed how a lack of unity by permanent states can cause obstruction and failure to act, condemning them for supposed political competition and irresponsibility. They

contrasted their responsible support for the charter against the permanent states who subjected the Council to their strategic interests, preventing conflict resolution and security governance (Security Council, 2014i). When a small respite came in the form of a weak and minimal resolution calling for ceasefire, brokered by Russia and the US outside of the Council, both sides framed themselves as responsible states protecting international law and stressed their own importance to the international order and maintenance of peace. Other states remained sceptical and non-permanent states deplored governance being taken out of the paralysed Council, for which they blamed the permanent states (Security Council, 2016a).

As Russia entered the conflict directly in order to support its ally it became even more obstructive in the Council, and its discourse leaned on its great power prerogative and attempted to delegitimise western attempts and moralising discourse as undermining a sovereign country. All attempts at ceasefire collapsed and the two sides blamed each other in a symbolic discussion in which the powers acted from an identity-based position and expressed their views of the international order from their privileged positions, with Russia and China prioritising state sovereignty and the western states supporting Council governance in this case. China raised the argument that western states previously conducted interventionism according to their own national interests but were now calling for veto restraint when the interests of another were at stake, accusing them of double standards behind moralising language. The non-permanent states displayed dissatisfaction with any side using the veto rather than governance being performed. Attempts at regulation of the conflict were framed by Russia as provocation and that western states were politicising the issue, while non-permanent states expressed frustration at the Council's division and questioned its credibility as even minimal resolutions had become impossible and it failed again to fulfil its role (Security Council, 2016b; 2016c)

As pressure mounted Russia continued to use its position and privileges to prevent any censure of its ally, engaging in harsh discursive conflict with the US. Non-permanent members criticised the disunity and the damage such a crisis caused to the image and role of the Council, demanding action and governance and lamented the politicising of humanitarian issues. Multiple members argued the Council was failing in its responsibilities and losing credibility due to great power rivalry in it. Russia accused western states of politically motivated accusations and political propaganda, as well as of using a disrespectful language of ultimatums that undermined the role of the Council. The US harshly criticised the use of the veto, together with its western allies in the Council, while China was against confrontation and called for a unity of the Council rather than action (Security Council, 2017d; 2017e; 2017f). The continued lack of resolution and regulation led to an intensification of both the conflict in Syria and the conflict in the Council, exacerbating polarisation.

The US fully accused Russia of being complicit in the exacerbation of the crisis rather than regulation and demanded accountability, framing itself as defending international norms. Russia counterattacked and presented itself as a responsible member of the international community which the US was attempting to mislead it, arguing that it was standing up for impartiality and sovereignty in line with its role. Each side accused the other of acting unilaterally and hiding political agendas behind their discourse, while the Russian use of veto was deplored by western states as impunity that undermined the Council. The non-permanent states complained that the great powers ignored them when creating drafts and were breaking the Council apart from their power positions, increasing mistrust towards the other members and using it for political competition. The western powers took action outside of the Council, Russia being already engaged, with the two sides arguing that the other was violating the charter. The non-permanent states condemned the failure of consensus and argued that the credibility of the Council is gravely damaged (Security Council, 2018a; 2018b)

Non-permanent states continued to produce drafts, with European states taking the lead, but Russian discourse considered them as having unacceptable political language and being unrealistic, using their position to determine what is acceptable, while promoting their own draft instead. Russia's veto was accused as motivated by political and strategic reasons, and the non-permanent states argued it was causing greater disunity and failure of the Council's responsibility (Security Council, 2019c). The different sides continued producing competing draft resolutions and couldn't even agree on how to deliver humanitarian aid, leading all sides to warn of the failure of the Council and complain about its sidelining. The non-permanent members were especially critical of the failure of the Council and the chronic state of the crisis, some saying the Council was not up to the task due to the political manipulations of the great powers who pursued their own interests instead of managing global peace and security. China aligned with Russia and vetoed alongside it in order to support the concept of sovereignty and to protest the perceived western politicisation of the topic (Security Council, 2019d; 2020b). The dynamics manifested in these discussions demonstrate that that conflict resolution was not only blocked by competing national interests but by identity-defensive role performances enabled by the structural inequalities between the members.

6 Discussion and conclusion

The empirical analysis examined how identities affect interests and behaviour and how this manifests in the Security Council in relation to crisis resolution. Its results show that the Council's discussions of the selected crises remained symbolically authoritative while remaining functionally limited, with permanence being performed discursively by the great powers and inequality affecting identity directly. The permanent members' behaviour manifested identity-defensive performance rather than producing conflict resolution as a part of the Council's global security governance and conflict

resolution role. All sides presented their positions as moral, especially the great powers, with the US and its western allies expressing their identity of an internationalist benign power, Russia their identity of a power protecting the norm of sovereignty, and China their identity of a responsible and neutral power. The permanent states seem to have internalised their identities as great powers, deriving that identity from the structure of the Council and their role in it, so that they acted in accordance with their great power privilege rather than effective conflict resolution, both through discourse and through action. They implicitly acted from a superior and privileged position and expressed both symbolic and actual power.

The capacity of the Council to resolve crises can be understood only by examining how these identities were performed in debates. The behaviour of the permanent members aligned with the theoretical expectation that identity is reproduced through interaction, as they repeatedly invoked their roles, responsibilities, and historical narratives, which reaffirmed permanence as a source of status and authority. The debates also show that the obstruction was not only motivated by interests but by identity defence, as their behaviour expressed identity-defence and was symbolically justified through their identity positions. As expected, they resisted all changes that threaten their self-conception and status, and they framed their positions in moral terms while stressing their high position in the global order. Repeated failures produced legitimacy erosion, and as dominant states undermine the body, they undermine the structure that legitimises them. Calls for reform, criticism of the veto, and references to responsibility can be read as expressions of this identity contestation. It is evident that in all three cases, while powers protected their material interests, they did so while taking extra care to frame their positions in a way that protected their identity as righteous great powers taking responsibility for the resolution of the very conflicts their behaviour helped prolong

The identities were instrumentalised and used to justify obstruction, but the obstruction itself provided a way for identity to be confirmed, as obstruction was used even when material interests were not harmed because resolutions and discussions were concerned with symbolic or moral matters. This created a context in which permanence produces identity, identity legitimises privilege, privilege encourages behaviour that undermines legitimacy, and legitimacy loss in turn solidifies identity-defensive behaviour. Therein might lie the reasons for the Council's chronic failures to exercise its role, as the institutional inequality and the importance of the unequal positions for identity reflect the expectation that institutional inequality produces dysfunctional behaviour. This implies that the Council is not simply paralysed by material interests but by identity structures that the institution itself reproduces, which is something other theoretical approaches overlook. In all cases, permanent members reverted to identity-defensive behaviour when proposed actions challenged their status or role, showing that the identity logic operated consistently across different types of conflicts despite variation in context.

These findings also indicate that Council inaction is not merely the product of strategic rivalry, but is also the consequence of identities shaped and defended through permanence, so that identity functions as an obstacle to conflict resolution which emanates from the Council's structure. The identity-producing effects of permanent status show that institutional hierarchy does not simply reflect power but creates behavioural patterns that systematically constrain conflict resolution, and that the Council's structure actively shapes how major states define their interests and roles during crises. The Council remains indispensable as a symbol and structure of international authority, yet its ageing structure enables behaviours that undermine the legitimacy on which that authority rests, and it fails to reflect the geopolitical changes that have occurred since it was founded. The implication is that the more great powers rely on their permanent status to defend their identities, the more they risk weakening the institution that confers that identity in the first place, which suggests that meaningful improvement in the Council's conflict-resolution capacity would require either moderation of great-power behaviour or reform that limits the protection of great power identities to the detriment of the Council's role. Resolving this dysfunction requires recognising the identity dimension of power, not only institutional design flaws. Without identity transformation structural reform is unlikely to succeed, since legitimacy and relevance would continue to be placed at risk, with commensurate challenges to great power identities. Future research could examine how the intensity of a crisis affects how strongly identities are performed, and how non-permanent members navigate the identity-based hierarchy created by permanent status, including whether they adapt to it or resist it.

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