Is Russia's Influence at the United Nations on the Decline?

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On the eve of the 80th Session of the United Nations General Assembly, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov addressed over a hundred diplomats gathered at a roundtable organized by the Russian Diplomatic Academy. Lavrov, who was scheduled to speak during the UNGA deliberations, dedicated a significant portion of his speech to discussing the Secretariat of the United Nations. Over the last few years, Lavrov and other representatives of the Foreign Ministry have voiced explicit criticism, especially of the Secretariat and extending to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, for what Russia regards as their taking an "anti-Russia line."

Moscow's assault on the Secretariat is a puzzling development. It does not signify a shift in its overall view of the UN as an organization or the role it plays in world affairs. Indeed, to Russia, the UN remains important. As a permanent member of the Security Council (UNSC), it wields the power of veto and enjoys significant power and status. At the same time, the last three and a half years have seen further erosion of Russia's influence within the organization, especially after it invaded Ukraine and was roundly condemned for it in the General Assembly. Rather than face the consequences of its illegal actions in Ukraine, condemned by most states, Russian officials resorted to undermining the work of the Secretariat through pressure and accusations of an alleged pro-Western bias and by seeking to discredit the professionalism of UN staff. It has sought to compensate for its lost influence by promoting, especially, the role of the BRICS. Nonetheless, Russia is unlikely to turn its back on the UN. It is unwilling to give up the inherited privilege of a permanent seat on the UNSC and lacks backing from its non-Western partners, which see the UN as central to solving the world's problems.

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Russia, the United Nations, and the Liberal International Order

The Russian Federation inherited the Soviet Union's seat as a permanent member of the UNSC. This endowed a much weaker Russia with an outsized influence on the main issues in international relations, especially in the area of peace and conflict management. Russia thus had a strong incentive to support the system that allocated it considerable power, including a veto at the UNSC. It has made use of the veto in the past to block unwanted UNSC resolutions, like in the 1990s, when it protected its Serb allies in Bosnia during the Yugoslav Wars.

Overall, Russia has been supportive of the UN's central role as the "backbone of the global security system" and "a principal platform for conflict prevention, management, and resolution," given its international legitimacy and its financial and other resources. Russia's main foreign policy documents of the last two decades highlighted this view. The 2013 and 2016 foreign policy "concepts" stated that "[the] UN should maintain its central role in regulating international relations and coordinating world politics in the 21st century, as it has proven to have no alternative." However, in 2023, reflecting the post-February 2022 realities and the desperate state of Russia-West relations, the newest foreign policy concept was far less sanguine about the UN. Russian policymakers claimed that significant pressure was being placed on the organization and related entities, including by states' circumventing it to impose unilateral economic sanctions, a clear reference to the West-led sanctions against Russia, and seeking to replace it with a "rules-based world order." In fact, they call for "restoring the UN's role."

Russia jealously guards its UNSC seat and sees it as a validation of its status as a great power. As one scholar explains, Russia "demands that its opinion be sought, and its position respected." Moscow claims that its role as a permanent member of the UNSC predetermines Russia's "place in the world." As Bobo Lo has pointed out, in the post-Cold War era, the UNSC seat remained Russia's "most visible symbol of formal equality with the United States." Indeed, as Moscow has sought to promote a vision of a multipolar world, the UN, and specifically, the UNSC, has played a crucial role in converting "a largely abstract proposition—the multipolar order—into a substantive reality." For much of the post-Cold War period, Russia, faced with the loss of superpower status, has sought a modern-day iteration of the 19th-century Concert of Europe, and the UNSC comes closest to that.

Yet while enjoying these inherited perks, Russia's sway over the UN has been on the decline. As Iver Neumann has noted, "Russia tends to wield its influence by veto rather than by initiative." Few other instances illustrate this better than Russia's behavior during the Syrian Civil War (2011–2024). Russia vetoed as many as 18 resolutions to protect the allied government of the then-Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad. Moreover, while often criticizing, especially the United States, for acting in violation of the UN Charter, Russia, with its actions in Ukraine, especially after the full-scale invasion in 2022, has flagrantly violated these legal norms and abandoned its responsibilities as a UNSC permanent member charged with protecting the international order. Moscow used its veto to shield itself from UNSC condemnation. Nonetheless, in a reflection of its declining status and

influence within the UN, it failed to escape several rounds of resounding UNGA condemnations of its illegal actions in Ukraine. Between half to two thirds of member states, including the likes of Brazil, Egypt, and the UAE, which are Moscow's BRICS partners, supported these critical resolutions, showing their disapproval of Russia's conduct.

Russia's Response to Its Waning Influence

Russia's answer to perceived humiliation was to go on the offensive. Russian officials blamed the West for allegedly "engineering" the UNGA votes. Lavrov accused the United States, UK, and European states of outright blackmailing the ambassadors of third countries to vote for resolutions that are critical of Russia. Not only did Lavrov not provide evidence for these serious allegations, but in placing the blame exclusively on the West, he denied agency to many UN member states, which, contrary to what Lavrov believes, are sovereign and have independent foreign policy and the sound judgment to condemn blatant violations of international law.

In addition, Russian officials have sought to discredit the international civil servants and administrators of Western origin working in the UN Secretariat. Lavrov and other Foreign Ministry representatives have claimed that they are somehow biased toward Russia and not observing professional impartiality. This is part of a larger strategy to delegitimize and taint all traces of Western influence, whether in international multilateral organizations or the broader international system, as promoting Western interests and preserving the West's alleged global hegemony. The 2023 foreign policy concept stipulates that, to facilitate the emergence of a truly multipolar world, Russia must eliminate "the vestiges of domination by the United States and other unfriendly states in global affairs."

Since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Russian officials have turned up the heat on the UN Secretariat, including Guterres, seeking to prevent expert investigations, alter reports, and even modify the language in the records of their own testimonies. In autumn 2022, after reports surfaced of Iran-originated kamikaze drones being used by the Russians in Ukraine, the Ukrainians and their European allies called on the UN to send experts to examine the debris. Russia strongly objected and, according to reports, tried to intimidate Guterres. Russian diplomats sought to discredit the secretary-general, a former Portuguese politician, calling him "a creature of Western capitals." They also warned him to "abstain from engaging in any illegitimate investigation" lest Russia decide to review its cooperation with the UN. At the time, the UN sought to facilitate an extension of the Black Sea grain deal and needed Russia's support. Ultimately, under significant pressure, Guterres avoided commenting on the Iranian drones. His December 12, 2022, report to the UNSC notes letters from Ukraine, the United States, the UK, France, and Germany alleging the transfer of UAVs from Iran to Russia, which they considered in violation of UNSC sanctions against the Islamic Republic, and forsaking an investigation. The same document also mentions Russia's serious concern with the Western countries' intentions,

as well as a letter from Iran, which denies everything. The Secretariat decided no further action was to be taken and would continue "examining the available information."

Russia has also sought to censor Secretariat employees by taking issue with the language used during testimonies. In April 2025, during testimony by Under-Secretary-General Rosemary DiCarlo, who reported on the increase in Russian bombardment of Ukraine and the resulting civilian casualties, Russia's UN ambassador accused her of "taking the side of 'the war party'" by repeating what he described as "fakes" propagated by the Ukrainians. He then proceeded to declare that the Secretariat had violated its "obligation to remain impartial as per Article 100 of the UN Charter" and undermined trust placed in the organization. Throughout the war, indeed, Russian diplomats have questioned the credibility of the Secretariat and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, voicing doubts about the veracity and objectivity of the information provided by them. They have accused High Commissioner Ferdinand Türk of "disregarding the principles of impartiality, equidistance, and objectivity" and allegedly "adopting an openly pro-Ukrainian stance" by failing to give proper consideration to Russian reports of supposed executions of Russian soldiers and alleged attacks against Russian civilian targets. In a July 10 statement, the Russian Foreign Ministry strongly criticized Guterres' statement condemning Russian air strikes that had disrupted the power supply to the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant, accusing him of "political bias," "near-unconditional support" for Ukraine, and supposedly acting as "mouthpieces for Western propaganda and distributors of disinformation and fake news."

Lavrov has personally led the way in attacking the secretary-general, whom he has increasingly tried to portray as compromised and aligned with Western interests against Russia. During his July 2024 UNSC speech, Lavrov declared that the personnel policy of the Secretariat ought to be changed to "eliminate the domination of Western citizens and subjects in the administrative UN bodies." He accused the West of "privatizing" the Secretariat. Lavrov depicted UN professional administrators who come from Western states as "NATO representatives" who assumed "all senior positions in the UN that are directly related to… peace, security, peacekeeping, information policy, and security of international structures around the globe." He stated that, "Among the many under-secretary-general posts, the key positions—those that shape the Secretariat's operations and thus influence the agenda—are all held by NATO members," including the secretary-general, who is Portuguese, and DiCarlo, a former U.S. diplomat who oversees political affairs, as well as a French citizen leading peacekeeping, a British subject in charge of humanitarian issues, and the deputy secretary-general, who, Lavrov claims, is a dual Nigerian-U.S. citizen.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova has gone even further, commenting on the secretary-general's proposal to limit the use of veto by UNSC permanent members. Even though Guterres, while supporting the idea of the reform, made it clear that it was up to UN member states to decide, Zakharova rebuked him and threatened him. She accused him of "overstepping his mandate by making politically ambiguous statements" and reminded him that the UNSC issue lay outside of the

"purview of the secretary-general." Importantly, in a veiled threat, she emphasized that the secretary-general is appointed on the recommendation of the UNSC, which, in her words, Guterres ought to remember. Significantly, Russian representatives interpreted the secretary-general's support for the UNSC veto reform as proof of his pro-Western orientation. In their view, the veto was the only thing that prevented "Western members of the UNSC from blindly pushing through decisions favorable to them" and "establishing a world order based on their 'rules,' rather than on international law."

Looking Ahead

As it struggles to restore its influence at the United Nations, Russia's focus in the past three and a half years has been on fora established with non-Western partners. The BRICS has emerged as the prime venue for Russia to show that it still matters on the global stage, is diplomatically relevant, and cannot be isolated by the West. Russia, which has vigorously promoted the role of BRICS in the world, hosted the BRICS summit in 2024. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization is an even older non-Western organization, set up in 2001. Since then, it has broadened its area of interest from Central Asian security to become a much larger organization that includes India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus, and has partner states in the Middle East. While Russia has relied on the SCO to compensate for its lost contacts with the West and for great power posturing, other states like the SCO for its loose, flexible format that does not restrict their foreign policy options.

Yet despite their growing relevance and appeal, neither of these organizations is envisaged as a replacement for the UN. Russia's own faltering fortunes at the UN and bitter complaints about the West's alleged domination over the Secretariat and circumventing of the UNSC will not dramatically shift its view of the UN. Moscow jealously guards its inherited position on the UNSC. In his September 2025 meeting with Guterres, Lavrov emphasized Russia's insistence that any reform must be a "carefully calibrated transformation" of the UN under the strict supervision of its members, especially UNSC permanent members. This reflects Lavrov's realization that, as a declining great power, Russia is hardly in a position to pursue radical change in the system, which, rather than strengthening it, will expose its weaknesses and could deprive it of its inherited assets.

Moreover, even among its non-Western partners, Russia would struggle to find support in its attacks against the UN. Most of them are emerging great powers and rising economies that value the UN and seek to expand their own sway within it rather than undermine it. This view is evident upon examining the adopted declarations of recent BRICS summits, which emphasize "the central role of the UN in the international system" and call "for reforms of the principal organs of the UN with a view to achieving concrete progress" to make it "more democratic, representative, effective, and efficient, and to increase the representation of developing countries in the Council."