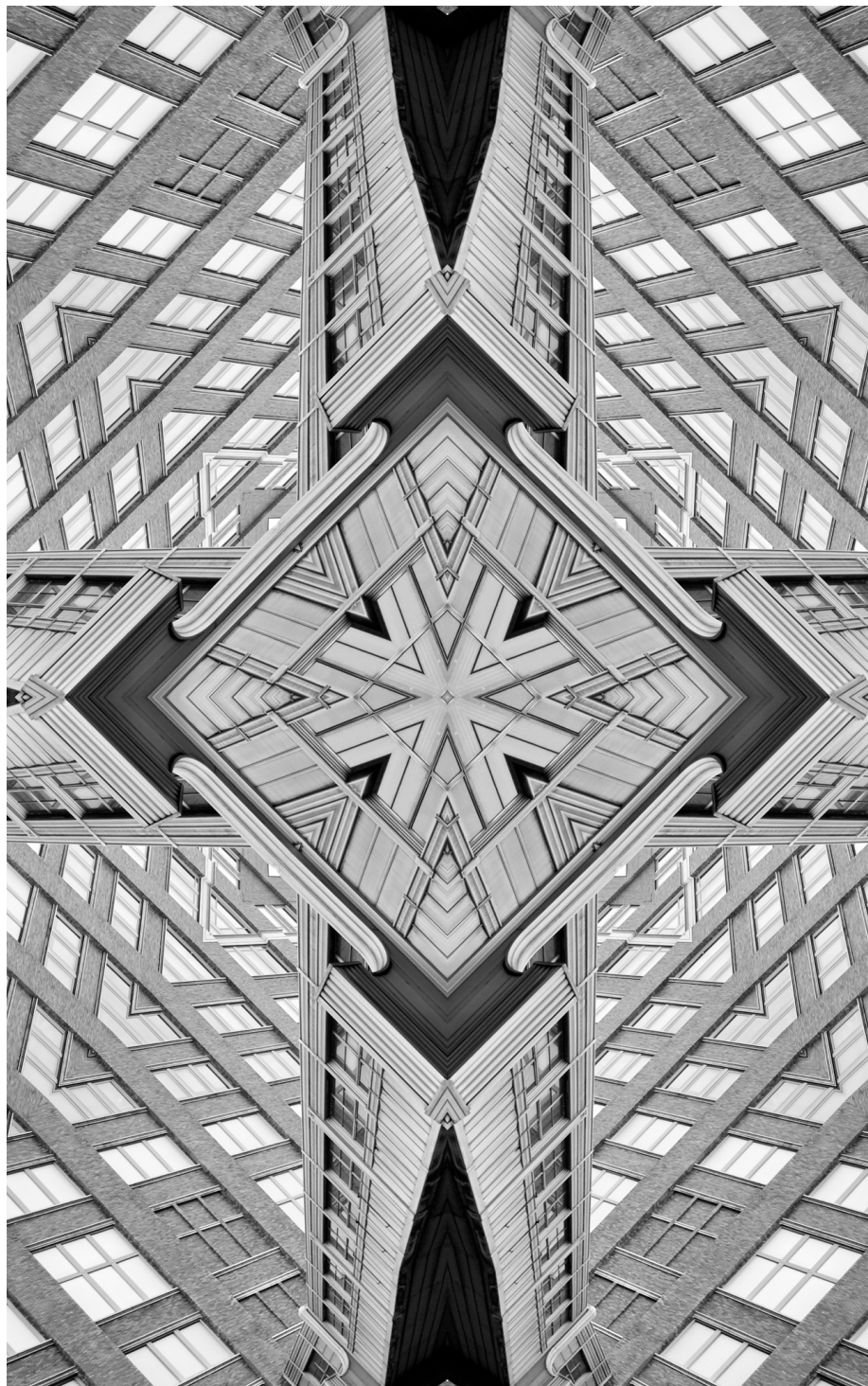


Issue Brief

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Between General Assembly Debates and Security Council Resolutions, Finding Coherence in the UN System

Jayati Sharma, Shambhavi Joshi,
and Sahil Deo

Abstract

This brief employs text analytics to assess the extent to which speeches at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) on matters of peace and security find resonance in resolutions passed by the UN Security Council (UNSC). These two are among the six main organs of the UN system: the UNGA is the main deliberative and representative body; and the UNSC is tasked with maintaining global peace and security. This brief studies four contemporary issues of security—i.e., climate change, terrorism, disarmament, and refugees. It recommends ways in which the two bodies can work together to improve the functioning of the UN system towards maintaining international peace and security.

Since its inception in 1945, the United Nations (UN) has worked to maintain global peace and security and, towards this goal, to enhance cooperation between member countries. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) and UN Security Council (UNSC), two of the UN system's six main organs, are vital to achieving these objectives. The UNGA is the principal deliberative, representative assembly of the 193 UN member states that discusses and passes resolutions on matters of global significance.^a While UNGA resolutions are recommendatory and not legally binding on any state, statements made at the UNGA are considered representative of the position a country takes on an issue.

The UNSC, mandated to ensure international peace and security, consists of five permanent member states (P5) with veto powers^b and 10 non-permanent members elected by the UNGA for two-year terms. It is responsible for passing legally binding resolutions on member states after assessing any threat to peace and security.

Article 11 of the UN Charter states that the General Assembly “may consider the general principles of cooperation in the maintenance of international peace and security” and that it “may discuss any questions relating to the maintenance of international peace and security brought before it by any Member of the United Nations, or by the Security Council”.¹ Article 24 of the UN Charter gives the UNSC the “primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security, and agrees that in carrying out its duties under this responsibility the Security Council acts on their behalf.”²

Although the Charter tasks the UNSC with the primary responsibility of maintaining peace and security, this is not exclusive, as noted by the International Court of Justice.³ Articles 10, 11, and 14 of the UN Charter state that the UNGA may bring attention to and/or recommend measures to the UNSC on matters concerning international peace and security. These determine the UNGA's role as a recommendatory body, with action taken by the UNSC, according to Chapter VII of the Charter. However, a restriction is imposed on the UNGA (in Article 12)—i.e., it cannot make recommendations to the UNSC if the Council is already dealing with those matters, unless it is requested to do so.⁴

a The UNGA's other responsibilities include approving the UN budget, electing the non-permanent members of the UNSC, and appointing the UN Secretary-General based on the recommendation by the UNSC. It also conducts studies for the purpose of maintaining international cooperation and assesses reports from other UN organs.

b Veto power allows any of the five permanent UNSC members (the US, the UK, Russia, China, and France) to veto a resolution.

Introduction

To be sure, certain mechanisms exist that facilitate interaction and coordination between these two organs. The resolution, ‘Uniting for Peace’ (Resolution 377(A)), for instance, adopted by the UNGA in 1950, declared that if “the [Security] Council fails to exercise its right responsibility of maintaining peace and security due to lack of unanimity between the members, the UNGA can consider the matter immediately [by calling an emergency session] in order to restore peace.”⁵ Of the 13 times the resolution has been invoked till date, eight were requested by the UNSC and five by the UNGA. In more contemporary times, in 2005, the UNGA and UNSC set up the Peacebuilding Commission to dispense advice to both organs and bridge them.⁶ This was reaffirmed in UNGA Resolution 76/83.⁷

The global landscape has changed since the UN was established, and for many years now calls for UNGA reforms have been pegged on increasing its power and improving the quality of debates therein.⁸ There is widespread agreement that the UNSC structure needs to be updated to tune it with current geopolitical realities.⁹

This brief makes an assessment of four issues that are relevant to the quest for global peace and security: climate change, terrorism, refugees, and disarmament. Some of these issues impact certain countries disproportionately; all of them, however, affect all countries, albeit in varied degrees. Climate change, for one, has emerged at the forefront of discussions at the UNGA and UNSC as countries around the world face the impacts of increasingly erratic weather patterns. The terrorist threat, meanwhile, has evolved and currently manifests in non-traditional ways. The displacement of large populations due to conflict or persecution brings threats to security, too. And although disarmament is no longer at the top of the agenda at both the UNGA and UNSC, it remains a key area of concern amid continued war and conflict in certain regions of the globe.

This brief offers a data-based analysis of how the UNGA and the UNSC have engaged with these challenges.

Methodology

This brief studies 8,481 UNGA speeches, accessible on the UN general debate corpus at the Harvard Dataverse,¹⁰ between 1970—when rapid decolonisation began and newly independent states were formed—and 2020. Using text analytics,^c the brief assesses the extent to which the four topics were mentioned in speeches made by states at the UNGA. To study the context of the mentions made, four words spoken before and after such mentions were recorded. This gives an insight into how the conversations around the topic have changed over the years.

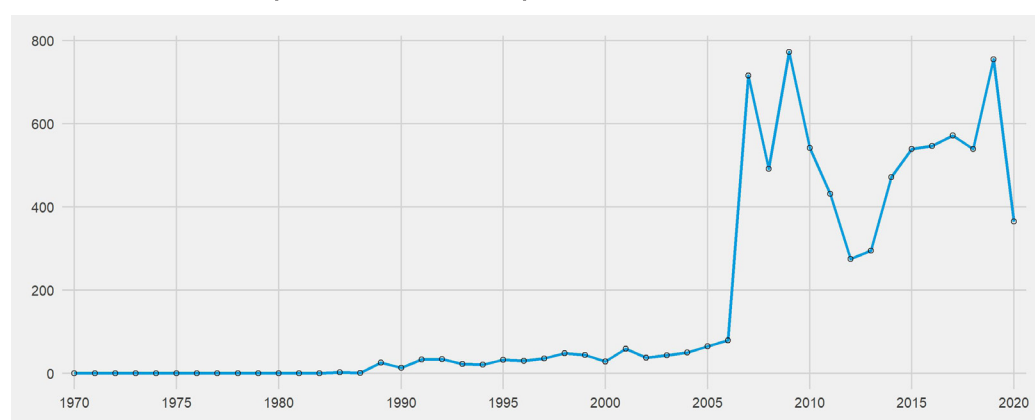
The brief then analyses UNSC resolutions passed in the years where the mentions of each topic at the UNGA were the highest. This was used to examine the coherence, if any, in the discussions at the two organs. While previous analyses have studied both aspects independently, this brief aims to correlate the two and explore how cooperation between them can be enhanced.

^c Text analytics is a process of analysing unstructured text data for insights and patterns.

The Issue of Climate Change

Climate change has been a subject of discussion at the UNGA since the 1970s. These discussions gained momentum in recent years, as the existential threat of global warming became increasingly evident (see Figure 1). A sharp rise in mentions of ‘climate change’ at the UNGA was seen in 2007 (with 716 mentions), when the theme of the annual UNGA session was ‘Responding to Climate Change’. The highest-ever mentions of climate change were in 2009 (773 mentions). Notably, mentions increased following the release of the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007, which highlighted the threat of climate change and explored options for adaptation and mitigation. Various agreements have been signed since then, and numerous conferences and the creation of committees have shaped the discussion around climate at the UNGA. There was a marked drop in mentions of climate in 2020, as the global focus shifted to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1:
Mentions of ‘Climate Change’ in UNGA Speeches (1970-2020)



Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

The Issue of Climate Change

Climate change disproportionately affects certain countries,¹¹ and the heightened threat on these regions is seen in the higher number of mentions at the UNGA (see Table 1). Island countries have mentioned ‘climate change’ most often—Tuvalu (250), Micronesia (241), Samoa (220), Kiribati (170), and Dominica (142); whereas the P5 countries’ combined mentions of climate change came to only 159.

Table 1:
Mentions of ‘Climate Change’ in UNGA Speeches, by Country (1970-2020)

Top Five Countries	
Tuvalu	250
Federated States of Micronesia	241
Samoa	220
Kiribati	170
Dominica	142
P5 Countries	
US	17
UK	56
France	39
China	33
Russia	14
India	44

Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

The Issue of Climate Change

In its speech at the UNGA in 2018, for example, Tuvalu said, “It is our humble hope that the entire Security Council membership can agree to include climate change as a permanent agenda item.” It called upon the UNSC to “appoint a special rapporteur to produce a regular review of global, regional and national security threats caused by climate change.”¹²

Climate change falls under the purview of the UNSC for its wide-ranging destabilising impacts.¹³ Climate concerns were first mentioned at UNSC deliberations only in 2007. Since then, there have been open debates and briefings, and region-specific resolutions that identify the adverse effects of climate change. However, the UNSC has yet to pass a thematic resolution on integrating climate-related security risks. As per the UNSC’s existing framework, climate-related risks are recognised as non-conventional threats,^d making it difficult to pass binding resolutions on these challenges.

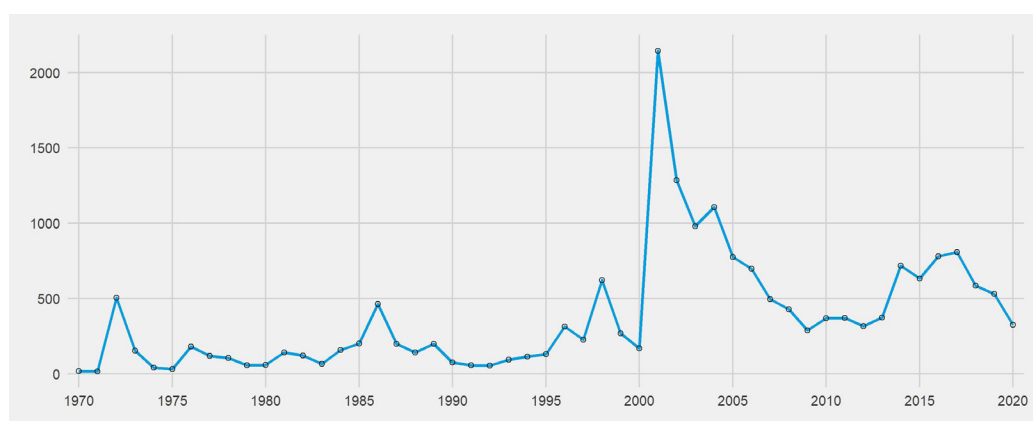
Notably, in 2021, a resolution aimed at integrating climate-related security risks as a central component of the UN’s conflict-prevention strategies was rejected following a veto by P5 permanent member, Russia.¹⁴ While all other UNSC members voted in favour, India was against it and China abstained—these countries argued that the UNSC is not the appropriate venue for such a discussion.¹⁵ Some observers have termed the UNSC’s response to climate change a ‘no-response’—i.e., reacting to crises due to climate change without overtly acknowledging climate change insecurity.¹⁶

^d Article 24 of the UN Charter gives the UNSC the responsibility of maintaining peace and security. As such, the UNSC deals with direct, or conventional threats, to peace and security, such as armed conflicts or terrorism. Non-conventional threats are non-military sources of threats in the environmental, social, or humanitarian areas. Climate change is a non-conventional threat because it broadly causes instability to peace and security, as a result of displacement of large populations and conflicts over resources.

Shifting Narratives on Terrorism

In contemporary times, threats of terrorism emerged amid rapid decolonisation in the 1970s.¹⁷ This brief considers the mentions of the words ‘terrorist’, ‘terrorists’, and ‘terrorism’. They were mentioned in UNGA speeches, 505 times in 1972 (the year of the Munich terrorist attack); 622 times in 1998 (the year of the US embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania); 2,144 times in 2001 (the year of the September terror attacks in the US); and 808 times in 2017 (the year of multiple terror attacks around the world). (See Figure 2)

Figure 2:
**Mentions of ‘Terrorism’ in UNGA
Speeches (1970-2020)**



Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

The subject of terrorism tends to be geographically focused. In 2019, 95 percent of deaths due to terrorism occurred in West Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South Asia, and the countries in these regions mentioned terrorism the most in their speeches at the UNGA (see Table 2).¹⁸ While these countries have for decades stressed the need for stricter resolutions, a lack of consensus among the P5 has stalled decision-making at the UNSC.

Table 2:
Mentions of ‘Terrorism’ in UNGA
Speeches, by Country (1970-2020)

Top Five Countries	
Syria	464
Libya	376
Israel	365
Turkey	338
Sri Lanka	334
P5 Countries	
USA	260
UK	166
France	153
China	64
Russia	240
India	316

Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

Shifting Narratives on Terrorism

The September 2001 attacks in the United States (US) led to the initiation of the so-called ‘global war on terror’.¹⁹ The attacks quickly changed the narratives around terrorism, security, and border control. Widespread media coverage, public outcry, and US hegemony led to quicker decision-making at the UNSC and legitimised the decades-long GWOT despite reports of human rights violations.²⁰ In the years prior to the US attacks, the UNSC dealt with terrorism on a case-by-case basis; after September 2001, the body established specialised committees and became the institution tasked to oversee counterterrorism activity at the UN.²¹

In 2001, UNSC Resolution 1373²² introduced the Counter-Terrorism Committee, and the Global Terrorism Database was formulated in the same year.²³ Stricter actions towards denying safe havens and financial support to terrorists and tighter immigration policies were imposed, citing national security concerns.

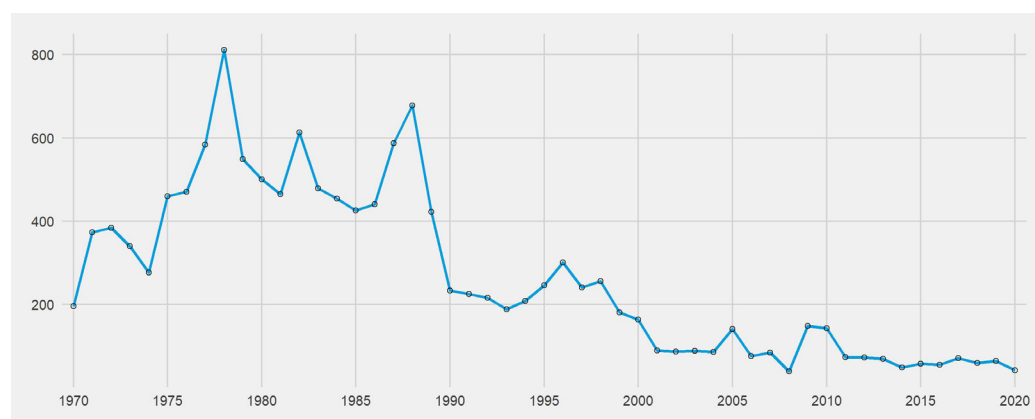
The UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy was established in 2006, and the UNGA reviews it every two years and reaffirms the UN’s counterterrorism priorities. The strategy addresses conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism, outlines measures to combat it, and builds states’ capacity to prevent its rise. Though certain mechanisms were implemented over the years following 2001, a holistic approach should be formulated that would include developing strategies to create resilient citizens and ensuring they receive post-attack support in the form of reconstruction, and monetary and medical aid.

Disarmament: A Forgotten Issue?

This analysis considers UNGA and UNSC discussions on both conventional and nuclear disarmament. Geopolitics has played a crucial role in how countries formulate their approach towards the use of weapons. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty (CTBT), Arms Trade Treaty, and the Convention on Certain Conventional Weapons are some of the key global agreements that aim to limit the spread of weapons.

At the UNGA, ‘disarmament’ was mentioned the most in 1978 (811 times) at the height of the Cold War as the Conference on Disarmament^e received recognition by the UNGA’s Tenth Special Session on Disarmament (see Figure 3). Mentions increased again in 1988 (678), just before the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since then, mentions of the issue have dropped even as the proliferation of weapons (both conventional and nuclear) have continued. Some scholars suggest that since the UN Charter was “preatomic”, the UN will need to modify its approach to deal with the proliferation of nuclear weapons.²⁴

Figure 3:
Mentions of ‘Disarmament’ in UNGA Speeches (1970-2020)



Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

^e The Conference on Disarmament is a multilateral disarmament forum. Its purpose is discussing and making recommendations on issues pertaining to disarmament, nuclear weapons, and reduction of armed forces and conventional weapons.

Disarmament: A Forgotten Issue?

The aim of disarmament is to “maintain international peace and security, uphold the principles of humanity, protect civilians, promote sustainable development, foster confidence and trust among States, and prevent and end armed conflict.”²⁵ As such, neighbouring countries of large nuclear and other weapons states have shown greater support for disarmament at the UNGA (see Table 3). Notably, the P5 countries have also spoken in favour of disarmament, with China doing so the most (254 times). China mentioned ‘disarmament’ the most number of times in 1986 (24 mentions) and 1987 (23 mentions), during the Cold War, where it called on the Soviet Union and the US to lead the way on disarmament. China had also stressed that all countries should have a say on the issue of disarmament since it affects their security interests.

Table 3:
Mentions of ‘Disarmament’ in UNGA
Speeches, by Country (1970-2020)

Top Five Countries	
Romania	288
Ukraine	281
China	254
Nepal	250
Mongolia	242
P5 Countries	
USA	31
UK	42
France	146
China	254
Russia	231
India	228

Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

Disarmament: A Forgotten Issue?

UNSC Resolution 1540 identified nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons as threats to international peace and security, and subsequent resolutions reaffirmed this idea.²⁶ However, efforts related to disarmament at the UNSC have slowed, halting progress on nuclear disarmament.²⁷ The P5 are all nuclear weapons states,^f with four of them having the highest military expenditures globally in 2021.²⁸

When India and Pakistan conducted nuclear tests in 1998, the UNSC passed Resolution 1172 to express concerns about the risk of a nuclear arms race and reaffirm the importance of the NPT and CTBT towards nuclear non-proliferation.²⁹ The resolution reflected the UNSC's ineffective action on disarmament, mainly because similar statements were not made against the P5.³⁰ Additionally, the P5 tend to support the argument that the global security environment is not conducive to disarmament, thus leading to delays in decision-making and a limited scope for the agenda to move forward.³¹

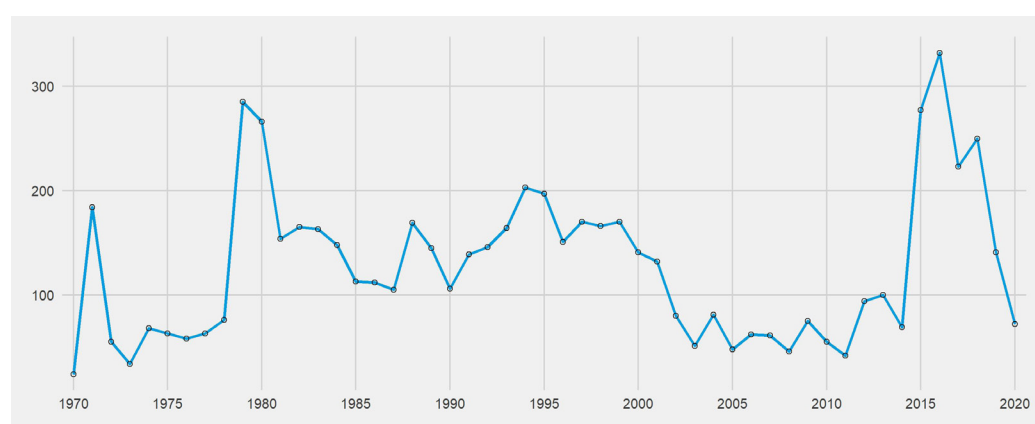
^f India, Pakistan, and North Korea have also declared possessing nuclear weapons, while Israel maintains a policy of deliberate ambiguity regarding its nuclear weapons programme.

Increasing Risk, Decreasing Attention: The Issue of Refugees

In the span of a decade, between 2011 and 2021, the number of refugees across the world increased from 10.5 million to 21.3 million.³² The large-scale movement of people across borders in search of security and livelihood could cause social, economic and political challenges in the host countries, such as strain on resources, increased homelessness and poverty, and possible ethnic imbalance.³³ This movement has been on a constant rise since the Second World War, and, as such, the refugee issue is a crucial topic of discussion at the UNGA.

The words ‘refugee’ and ‘refugees’ were mentioned the most during the recent European refugee crisis—277 times in 2015 and 332 in 2016. Frequent mentions were also recorded in 1979 (285 times) and in 1980 (266 times) following the Soviet Union’s invasion of Afghanistan. In 2018, amid the Rohingya refugee crisis, there were 250 mentions of these terms (see Figure 4).

Figure 4:
Mentions of ‘Refugees’ in UNGA Speeches (1970-2020)



Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

Increasing Risk, Decreasing Attention: The Issue of Refugees

As of 2021, more than half of the world's refugees are from Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq, and Eritrea.³⁴ Developing regions host up to 86 percent of the world's refugees, with the highest numbers in Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia, and Jordan.³⁵

Table 4:
Mentions of 'Refugees' in UNGA Speeches, by Country (1970-2020)

Top Five Countries	
Sudan	180
Tanzania	165
Japan	147
Jordan	136
Democratic Republic of the Congo	125
P5 Countries	
USA	71
UK	78
France	64
China	25
Russia	18
India	41

Source: CPC Analytics, based on data from UN General Debate corpus.

Increasing Risk, Decreasing Attention: The Issue of Refugees

The UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950 to provide relief to people fleeing conflict and violence. Apart from seeking ways to reduce the number of displaced people and refugees, the UNHCR also offers medical assistance and supports the reintegration of returning refugees in their home countries. In 1998, the UNSC unanimously adopted Resolution 1208 to affirm that the security of refugees is the primary responsibility of states and that refugee camps must follow international refugee, human rights, and humanitarian laws.³⁶ In 2018, UNGA introduced the Global Compact on Refugees framework for more predictable and equitable sharing of responsibilities.³⁷ Though the framework may reduce the burden on neighbouring countries that face the spillover effects of insecurity, the non-binding nature of UNGA resolutions has made them largely ineffective. In contrast, the sensitive nature of the topic and conflicting positions of the member states have constrained the P5 from formulating stricter resolutions.

A unique emerging global challenge is that of ‘climate refugees’, or those forced to flee their home country due to the life-threatening effects of climate change. Although the UN has yet to introduce the term in its lexicon, it acknowledges the dangers posed by climate change, and the UNHCR is steering the mainstream debate on the issue.³⁸ The issue lies at the intersection of two critical challenges in contemporary times—climate change and refugees—and, as such, should be viewed through a multidimensional perspective. Additionally, as climate change impacts worsen, the number of climate refugees will only likely increase.

Improving Coordination Between the UNGA and UNSC

This study sought to offer insights into how issues are discussed by states at the UNGA and the UNSC. The impact of climate change has forced world leaders and the UN bodies to view it as a threat to international security. The UNSC has previously expanded its mandate and passed resolutions around other non-conventional threats like HIV/AIDS in the 1980s and, more recently, the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, climate change can also be included in its debates and thematic resolutions can be passed on the subject.³⁹ Additionally, terrorist activities have had severe repercussions on communities in South Asia, West Asia, and Africa in recent years, and although the issue has been debated extensively at the UNGA, no binding solutions were formulated. Furthermore, discussions on the refugee crisis have led to the creation of a framework on shared responsibility but should also result in binding resolutions at the UNSC. At the same time, the debates on disarmament have slowed at both the UNGA and UNSC.

All countries will continue to face challenges arising from climate change, refugees, terrorism, and nuclear weapons. To arrive at acceptable and plausible solutions, larger representation at the UN is necessary. Indeed, calls for the expansion of UNSC's permanent membership have been made in the past several years⁴⁰—this will help make the body more representative and inclusive. Meanwhile, the strength of the UNGA is that it offers equal representation and a vote to each country irrespective of size. Improving the quality of interaction and encouraging deeper coordination between the UNGA and UNSC will provide the latter with crucial insights during debates and will also encourage the UNGA to suggest relevant recommendations.

Coordination efforts between the UNGA and UNSC can be heightened in the following ways:

1. **Limitations on veto power:** An increasing number of countries support the call for reforms in the UNSC structure. For instance, the G4 countries (India, Brazil, Japan, and Germany) support each other's bids for permanent UNSC membership, and many other UN members have called for the UNSC to be expanded and the P5's veto powers to be diminished.⁴¹ It is essential for the body to make the necessary modifications to become more inclusive and representative. One way to do so is to increase transparency in the veto procedure. In instances where over two-thirds of UNGA member countries support the implementation of a certain resolution, there should

Improving Coordination Between the UNGA and UNSC

be restrictions on the P5's veto powers. Veto powers should also be curtailed in cases of human rights violations.⁴²

2. **Accountability:** A mechanism that exacts accountability from the UNSC should be implemented. Stricter reviews of the UNSC's annual reports should be carried out by the UNGA to see if all important recommendations presented by the Assembly were discussed. This is an essential step towards building a fairer and more representative system.
3. **Effective communication:** A smoother process of communication between the two organs should be established. The presidents and high-level officials from both must meet regularly for agenda-setting and to discuss pressing concerns. Free-flowing communication between the two will assure non-permanent members that any event or situation that can potentially harm international peace and security will be addressed by the UNSC.
4. **Collective action:** Subject-relevant bodies—such as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UN Office for Disarmament Affairs, UN Office of Counter-Terrorism, and the UNHCR—should be included in the UNSC resolution-setting process to provide suggestions, real-time data, and effective means of collective action. The involvement of the UNSC in these issues is not aimed at substituting these bodies, but to complement their work and bring more tangible results through joint efforts.


Additionally, the UNGA should be granted more powers than just electing non-permanent UNSC members, particularly focused on improving the quality and seriousness of the debates. Climate change, terrorism, refugees, and the proliferation of weapons are challenges that require global action and multilateral solutions. There should be a permanent coordinating body that will integrate the work done by all UN agencies and subsidiary bodies to ensure transparency, accountability, and effective decision-making. All countries are affected by each issue differently, but nurturing a sense of shared responsibility can be a step towards promoting unity and international peace.

Conclusion

This brief sought to highlight the need for increased coordination between the UNGA and UNSC. It used data-based techniques to analyse the mentions of four issues—climate change, terrorism, disarmament, and refugees—in UNGA debates, and examine the UNSC resolutions on these same subjects that saw the most mentions of specific words related to these matters.

Although many countries have been vocal about these issues at the UNGA, the actions of the UNSC do not always reflect these priorities. While the global impacts of climate change are well-known, it is still being debated for inclusion in the UNSC framework. At the same time, the issue of refugees needs to be viewed as a matter of shared responsibility by all countries. Although the threat of terrorism has been around for many years, decision-making at the UNSC has historically been slow, picking up pace only after the September 2001 attacks in the US. Finally, the discourse on disarmament has lost momentum over the years due to a lack of consensus among the P5 countries. These differences in priorities only highlight the need for more coordination between the UNGA and UNSC.

The under-representation of countries and the veto procedure at the UNSC, coupled with the UNGA's lack of decision-making power has impeded the resolution of many issues. The results of debates carried out at the UNGA and UNSC are impacted by the functionality and structure of the two bodies. As the UNSC is dominated by the P5 and includes only 10 other non-permanent members, most UN member states are inclined to turn to the more representative UNGA as the platform to discuss issues affecting all countries.⁴³ However, even while countries raise concerns at the UNGA, binding resolutions on the same can be passed only by the UNSC.

Therefore, improving transparency in the workings of the UNSC and leveraging the UNGA's recommendatory powers will enable the former to consider matters concerning all member states and pass effective resolutions. Importantly, improved coordination between the UNGA and UNSC will strengthen the UN. 

Jayati Sharma is a Research Analyst at CPC Analytics.

Shambhavi Joshi is an Associate Consultant at CPC Analytics.

Sahil Deo is a co-founder of CPC Analytics.

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20, Rouse Avenue Institutional Area,
New Delhi - 110 002, INDIA
Ph. : +91-11-35332000. Fax : +91-11-35332005
E-mail: contactus@orfonline.org
Website: www.orfonline.org