

United Nations Security Council and General Assembly Responses to the Russian Invasion of Ukraine

March 7, 2022

Responding to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the U.N. [Security Council](#) and [General Assembly](#) have met on several occasions to discuss possible action to address the conflict's threat to international peace and security. In the process, these organs have used procedures unused in the United Nations for 40 years. Congress may consider examining the effect of these actions on U.S. obligations and those of U.N. Member States.

Security Council Action

The U.N. Security Council is [tasked](#) with the primary authority to address threats to international peace and security. The Security Council has met [on several occasions](#) to consider responses to Russia's 2014 invasion and partial occupation of Ukraine. The recent Russian troop buildup and invasion of Ukraine has spurred the Security Council to intensify its consideration of the situation, resulting in a [number](#) of Council meetings.

The Security Council has the [authority](#) to adopt resolutions, obligating all Member States to carry out its decisions. Pursuant to [Chapter VI](#) of the Charter, the Security Council can call upon parties to settle any dispute by peaceful means, and can recommend actions to achieve settlement. [Chapter VII](#) empowers the Council to determine breaches of the peace and acts of aggression and direct all U.N. Member States to take necessary action, including the use of military force, to restore international peace and security. After Russia began its invasion of Ukraine, the Council met on [February 25](#) to consider a [resolution](#) submitted by the United States and Albania determining Russia's invasion to be an illegal act of aggression, and "deciding" that Russia should immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine and withdraw. Adoption of a substantive resolution in the Security Council [requires](#) an affirmative vote of nine members of the 15-member Council, with the concurrence by vote, or abstention, of all five of the permanent members of the Council (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States). After discussion in the Council on February 25, the Council [voted](#) on the resolution. Although 11 members voted in favor, Russia voted no, [vetoing](#) the resolution.

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In response to the Russian veto, on February 27, 2022, the Council [considered](#) a resolution to call an emergency special session of the U.N. General Assembly, stating that the Security Council was prevented from “exercising its primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security.” Such resolutions in the Council are considered [procedural](#) and therefore are not subject to permanent-member veto. The Council adopted the [resolution](#) with 11 members voting yes, three abstaining, and Russia casting the lone vote against. This was the first instance since 1982, and the [eighth](#) in history, where the Council had called for such a session.

General Assembly Action

The 193-member U.N. General Assembly is the plenary body of the United Nations. On February 28, 2022, the Assembly [convened](#) a special emergency session on Russian aggression in Ukraine under [General Assembly resolution 377A\(V\)](#), widely referred to as the “Uniting for Peace” (or U4P) resolution. Originally adopted in 1950 to [respond](#) to Soviet vetoes in the Security Council during the Korean War, the U4P resolution sets out procedure for the Assembly to immediately consider matters of international peace and security when the Security Council is unable to act due to the lack of unanimity among its five permanent members. Meetings pursuant to U4P can be initiated by Security Council or General Assembly resolution. The convening of an emergency session under the framework of the U4P resolution is relatively rare; since 1950, the Assembly has held 11 such [sessions](#).

On March 3, the Assembly adopted a [resolution](#) on Russian aggression in Ukraine under U4P, which affirms the Assembly’s commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and independence, deplores in the strongest terms the aggression by Russia against Ukraine in violation of [Article 2\(4\)](#) of the U.N. Charter, and demands that Russia immediately cease its use of force against Ukraine. The resolution passed with 141 in favor (including the United States) and five against (Belarus, Eritrea, North Korea, Russia, and Syria), with 35 abstentions (including China, India, Pakistan, and South Africa). Adoption of a resolution requires an affirmative vote by two-thirds of all members present and voting.

Broadly speaking, unlike Security Council resolutions, General Assembly resolutions, including those adopted under the U4P framework, are [recommendatory](#) in nature and nonbinding. At the same time, some observers [maintain](#) that General Assembly resolutions can hold significant political weight and demonstrate the collective will of U.N. Member States.

Considerations for Continued U.N. Action

Both the Council and Assembly might continue to address aspects of the Russian invasion and its consequences. For example, the Council has already met for a [briefing](#) on the humanitarian and refugee crisis in Ukraine, and is to consider a resolution addressing this crisis. The Assembly has completed its initial emergency special session but may resume the session to consider new developments. The United States, its allies, and the majority of the international community might act in other U.N. bodies, such as the [Human Rights Council](#) or selected [U.N. specialized agencies](#). Russia’s obstruction of Security Council action has given new momentum to [arguments](#) that the veto power is ill-suited to the principles of the United Nations. Unsuccessful past proposals for reform might reemerge, calling for an end to the preeminent position the permanent Security Council members, including the United States, occupy in the United Nations. Russia’s participation in Security Council [meetings and votes](#) on the crisis, and its continued [participation](#) and [membership](#) in the United Nations, could be challenged by a growing number of member states.

While Congress and the executive branch cannot solely direct U.N. action, they have roles in shaping policy in the U.N. system: Congress provides funding for U.S. contributions, conducts oversight of [U.S. participation](#) in the United Nations, and confirms U.S. representatives to the United Nations through the

Senate, while the executive branch represents and implements U.S. policy in U.N. fora. Looking ahead, Members of Congress will have the opportunity to call on the executive branch and the United Nations to effectively address the situation in Ukraine and oversee related decisionmaking.

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