

Rising Powers, UN Security Council Reform, and the Failure of Rhetorical Coercion

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Abstract

Despite repeated calls for reform, the UN Security Council has as yet resisted to satisfy the demands of a group of rising powers – Brazil, Germany, India, and Japan (G4) – for a permanent seat. We focus on one strategy of institutional adaptation to power shifts mentioned in the introductory article to this special issue and examine why the G4's rhetorical coercion strategy has failed to resonate with the Council's permanent members and the wider UN membership. Looking at the key debate on Security Council reform in the General Assembly in 2005, we examine the justifications the G4 have offered to support their proposal and whether these have been accepted as legitimate by UN member states. We show that the G4's rhetorical coercion strategy has failed to resonate with the targeted audience because the G4 have justified their demand strongly in terms of how their material contributions would enhance the UN's performance. In contrast, the G4's opponents provided justifications predominantly based on fair and democratic procedures, generating higher levels of expressed support. The importance of procedural fairness is consistent with findings in social psychology and challenges the prominent argument that performance is the main path to legitimacy for international institutions.

Policy Implications

States seeking institutional reform cannot just state their demands, they need to justify why their demands are legitimate. For these justifications to resonate with the targeted audience and, in particular, with veto players who can thwart their reform attempts, states must appeal to widely accepted norms.

Improving the performance matters for the legitimacy of international institutions, but member states place as much, if not more, value on procedural fairness. Hence, states that strive for institutional reform cannot just point to resulting increases in the institutions' performance. They must be able to appeal to gains in procedural fairness that result from their proposed reforms.

Investing political capital and resources in a campaign for institutional reforms at the UN Security Council that cannot be justified with a view to enhancing procedural fairness does not pay off for states. Not only does it deflect attention from other pressing issues that need to be addressed at the UN, but states that do so also risk alienating states whose support they need for other initiatives at the UN or elsewhere.

Introduction

There is near-universal agreement among United Nations member states that the Security Council needs to adapt to the changes in world politics that have occurred since the creation of the UN. ¹ The permanent membership and veto right for a small group of states that derive their privileges from the power constellation at the end of World War II are perceived to be particularly anachronistic. Scholars even point to a norm of Security Council reform in that no state can publicly reject the need for reform (Schaefer, 2017). And yet, all efforts to reform the Council have failed to garner the necessary support of the Council's five permanent members (P5) and two thirds of the wider UN membership. In 2005, in the wake of the UN World Summit, Brazil, Germany, India and Japan (the G4) have launched the most promising reform initiative since the General Assembly (GA) had set up an open-ended working group on the matter in 1993. However, their proposed plan for reform, which would have given them permanent seats in the Council and thus influence and status (Ward, 2017), failed to receive sufficient backing. On the contrary, the G4's opponents came forward with competing reform proposals to frustrate the G4's demands.

The Introduction to this special issue (Kruck and Zangl) proposes four strategies of institutional adaptation to power shifts: Power bargaining, strategic cooptation, rhetorical coercion, and principled persuasion. We focus on one of these strategies – rhetorical coercion (see also Fioretos, this issue; Goddard, this issue; MacDonald, this issue) – to shed light on the G4's failure to provide compelling justifications for their reform initiative.

Our paper makes two important contributions. First, because the G4 lack outside options (power bargaining) and sufficient material resources they can trade in for reform (strategic cooptation), rhetorical coercion is an important strategy for the G4 that has not been

examined in the context of Security Council reform so far. Rhetorical coercion occurs when a 'claimant's opponents have been talked into a corner, compelled to endorse a stance, they would otherwise reject' (Krebs & Jackson, 2007, p. 36). In the context of institutional adaptation, negotiating parties – challengers and preservers of an institutional status quo – publicly exchange arguments about the legitimacy of the status quo and the proposed reform to mobilize support. If rhetorical coercion succeeds and the justifications resonate with the target audience, the space for contestation is narrowed down to the extent that counter-narratives are no longer feasible. One party to the debate is rhetorically outmaneuvered and must consent to the other party's claims (Krebs & Jackson, 2007; Schimmelfennig, 2001). Second, we lack a clear understanding of the conditions under which rhetorical coercion is successful in the context of institutional adaptation. We therefore build on several strands of literature in political science and social psychology to examine which justifications resonate with the target audience and why.

The argument we propose is that the G4 failed to put forward justifications that sufficiently resonated with the target audience and, as such, failed to devise an effective rhetorical coercion strategy. We show that the G4 have put strong legitimacy emphasis on how their economic and political weight and their material contributions would enhance the Council's *performance* in addressing international security threats as well as compliance with Council decisions. However, the G4's performance-based justifications did not win sufficient support and failed to close off routes for their rivals to reject them rhetorically. By contrast, justifications based on fairer *procedures* that the opponents of the G4 have used to justify their rejection of the G4 proposal – accountability, participation, representation of developing states – generated much higher levels of expressed support among UN member states. The importance states publicly attach to fair and democratic procedures is consistent with accounts pointing to an increasing salience of democratic governance norms. It is also in line with research in social psychology that highlights the value individuals ascribe to fair decision-making procedures. We explore the plausibility of this argument with data collected in the 2005 UNGA debate on the G4 proposal for Security Council reform. We have chosen the 2005 debate because in the run-up to the UN world summit in the same year an important – perhaps even unique (Stedman, 2007) – window of opportunity opened for the G4. In addition to that, the debate allows us to examine not just the justificatory claims of the G4 but also whether they resonated with the targeted audience (the P5 and the wider UN membership).

Our aim is *not* to explain why the reform proposed by the G4 failed. We do not claim that the reform fell through because the G4's rhetorical coercion strategy was misguided. Nor do we seek to assess the explanatory power of the G4's ill-fated rhetorical coercion strategy relative to other potential explanations for the failure of Security Council reform, such as the high decision-making threshold for Charter amendments (Hosli and Dörfler, 2019), the G4's lack of outside options (Zangl et al., 2016; Lipsy, 2017), or the G4's inability to provide convincing normative arguments or material incentives to their regional competitors (Schirm, 2010). We believe that rhetorical coercion in the context of institutional adaptation is an important strategy for rising powers that warrants an analysis in its own right. Our aim is therefore to present and examine an argument as to why the G4's rhetorical coercion strategy failed to provide compelling justifications for their reform proposal that would have forced their opponents to endorse a stance they were opposed to.

In the next section, we develop our argument in more detail. In the third section, we introduce our empirical strategy and present the results of our analysis. The final section summarizes the findings and draws some conclusions about how and why rising powers apply rhetorical coercion in response to power shifts.

The argument

The argument we propose in this article is that the rhetorical coercion strategy the G4 have employed to claim permanent membership in the Security Council has failed to talk the P5 and a large enough segment of the UN membership into a corner. The justifications the G4 provided for their claims did not sufficiently resonate with the target audience, and they did not close off routes for rebuttal for their opponents. Negotiating institutional adaptation involves coercive threats and material incentives, but it also involves struggles over institutional legitimacy. States cannot just state their demands, they need to justify why their proposed institutional reform is normatively appropriate: '(B)ehind every claim to an issue, every demand for a settlement, is a rationale explaining why an audience should accept a particular bargaining position as legitimate' (Goddard, 2006, p. 41).

Rhetorical coercion is a 'political strategy that seeks to twist arms by twisting tongues' (Krebs and Jackson, 2007, p. 42). It implies that political actors use language instrumentally to justify their policy objectives and obtain acceptance and support (Kruck and Zangl, this issue). By rhetorical framing, political actors seek to engage in meaning-making. If successful, they narrow the space for contestation by closing off routes for opponents to challenge the dominant justifications and, eventually, coerce their opponents into acceptance. Opponents might not be silenced altogether, but as the rhetorical terrain is increasingly constructed in a way that is unfavorable to them, they can at best contest the margins but not the core of the dominant narrative (Hurd, 2005; Krebs and Jackson, 2007; McDonald and Merefield, 2010; Holland and Aaronson, 2014; Daßler et al., 2018).

Rhetorical coercion differs in important ways from principled persuasion (Kruck and Zangl, this issue; Goddard, this issue). Actors who craft rhetorical moves with which they intend to get their opponents 'rhetorically maneuvered into a corner' (Krebs and Jackson, 2007, p. 42) need not be convinced of the justifications they publicly express. Rather, they are strategic actors who use justifications instrumentally, choosing those rhetorical devices they expect to yield most traction – be they in line with their true motivations or not (Schimmelfennig, 2001). Furthermore, as highlighted by Kruck and Zangl in the Introduction to this special issue, the purpose of rhetorical coercion is not to convince an opponent of the truth or reasonableness of one's claims and arrive at a consensus. The

purpose is to force an opponent into acceptance by closing off opportunities for rebuttal even if the opponent is unconvinced of the validity of the claims (Krebs and Jackson, [2007](#)).

What rhetorical moves can achieve this purpose? The justifications political actors bring forward to bolster their claims must resonate with the dominant norms and understandings of the relevant community. Thus, when molding their rhetorical strategy, actors are not entirely free in linking their arguments to whatever value judgments. Rather, to render public opposition to their claims costly, they must link these claims to norms and justifications that are accepted by the relevant audience (Goddard, [2009](#); Daßler et al., [2018](#)). This is expected to work particularly well when political actors can rhetorically entrap their opponents, that is, when they are able to publicly expose their opponents' failure to live up to self-proclaimed normative convictions (Goddard, [2009](#); Lyall, [2006](#); Schimmelfennig, [2001](#)). Rhetorical coercion is unlikely to work if 'the structures of discourse ... are relatively loose (and permissive)' (Krebs and Jackson [2007](#), p. 57). Hence, when there is little agreement on what compelling norms a given community shares, rhetorical coercion is unlikely to have the intended effect of foreclosing alternative rhetorical routes and extorting support.

In the context of Security Council reform, the G4 apply a rhetorical coercion strategy if they provide public justifications for their demand to become permanent Council members in the relevant debates in the GA, drawing on widely shared norms that are difficult to rebut publicly. Thus, to win over UN member states, the G4 need to offer acceptable justifications. This presupposes enough UN member states with no self-serving interest in Security Council reform (i.e. no aspirations for permanent membership or wish to resist a regional hegemon). It also presupposes that the preferences of UN members are not fixed so that member states can be won over (O'Mahoney, [2017](#)) – as is testified, for instance, by the varying number of supporters of the G4 and their regional rivals over time (Swart, [2013](#)). Moreover, it is important to note that it is not so much the speakers representing their countries in the GA who need to be rhetorically outmaneuvered, as these rarely enjoy sufficient leeway from their superiors in their capitals, but rather the higher policy-making echelons in UN member states' capitals. The debate in the GA is therefore primarily to be seen as the focal point of a broader debate in which the latter are the G4's main target audience.

If there is an audience to be won over, and if justifications matter, what makes for a good justification? Krebs and Jackson (2007, p. 48), as well as others, do not spell out which specific justifications appeal to publics and why, but they make the general argument that rhetorical coercion is more likely to be successful if claimants can refer to 'existing commonplaces that represent the boundaries of legitimate framing'. Building on extant scholarship, we propose two main grounds of legitimacy for international institutions that the G4 may use to justify their proposal: good performance and fair procedures (input and output legitimacy, see e.g., Buchanan and Keohane, [2006](#); Scharpf, [1999](#); Tallberg and Verhaegen, this issue). ²

While scholars typically argue that both grounds matter (Dellmuth et al., [2019](#)), the dominant view has traditionally been that the legitimacy of international institutions depends primarily on their *performance*. Accordingly, an institution's legitimacy stems from its ability to enhance the common welfare of a given community by effectively solving problems in need of collective solutions (Scharpf, [1999](#)). Institutions are created with a specific aim. If they do not fulfill their purpose, they lose legitimacy. Some proponents of this view argue that performance is the most important, if not the only, source of legitimacy for international institutions (Buchanan and Keohane, [2006](#); Gutner and Thompson, [2010](#)).

That the legitimacy of and support for governments and other domestic institutions depend on their ability to generate favorable outcomes, has been supported by decades of political science research (for an overview see Lewis-Beck and Stegmaier, [2000](#)). Recent research on international institutions also shows that performance is an important driver of their legitimacy (e.g., Dellmuth and Tallberg, [2015](#)).

Drawing from social psychology, we suggest that fair and democratic *procedures* are a more suitable justification for legitimate international institutions than often claimed. Social psychologists have pointed out that fair procedures matter in various ways. From an instrumental process control perspective, fair procedures provide actors with voice and give them the opportunity to introduce inputs into the decision-making process (Thibaut and Walker, [1975](#)). Social identity theory argues that actors value fair procedures because they allow them to construct their identity as respected and equal members of a community and extend to them self-esteem and prestige (Lind and Tyler, [1988](#)). Fair procedures also serve as heuristic for actors who are uncertain about decisional outcomes they receive from institutions. Accordingly, actors use information about the fairness of procedures to evaluate decisional outcomes and the trustworthiness of decision-makers (Van den Bos et al., [1998](#); see also Bøggild and Petersen, [2016](#)).

A large body of research has shown that actors and institutions – such as the police or courts – that meet standards of procedural legitimacy are more likely to be accepted and complied with by their addressees (Levi et al., [2009](#); Murphy, [2017](#); Tyler, [2006](#)). A key finding in social psychology is that fair procedures can compensate for weak performance (Brockner and Wiesenfeld, [2005](#)). Scholars have also suggested that procedures are more important than performance showing that dramatic improvements in the performance of the police in the United States (US) has not entailed increases in support for their work, as legitimacy and support depended on the procedural fairness of police work (Tyler, [2006](#)). While the social psychological mechanism of procedural fairness has not been investigated with regard to international institutions, international relations scholars have observed the rise of a global norm of democratic governance (Dingwerth et al., [2019](#)) that has affected the design of international institutions, leading to the creation of information sharing structures (Ecker-Ehrhardt, [2018](#)), civil society participation (Tallberg et al., [2013](#)) and the establishment of parliamentary bodies (Rocabert et al., [2019](#)). Studies have also shown that procedures are an important if not the most important source of legitimacy of international institutions for states (Binder and Heupel, [2015](#)) and citizens (Dellmuth et al., [2019](#)).

We argue that the suitability of references to fair and democratic procedures as legitimation devices for international institutions can also help explain the failure of the G4 to legitimate their proposal for Security Council reform and apply an effective rhetorical coercion strategy. As we show below, the G4 have pursued a rhetorical coercion strategy that puts strong justificatory emphasis on performance-based claims about how the G4's economic and political weight as well as their material contributions to the UN would enhance the Council's effectiveness in addressing international security threats and would improve compliance with Council decisions. The G4 have also justified their proposal in terms of increased representation, but they have put far less emphasis on procedural grounds. While some UN member states have expressed acceptance of the G4's performance justifications, the performance argument was not strong enough to close off routes for rebuttal. The G4's rivals have opted for making justificatory claims of a type that was less favorable to the G4 – namely claims about procedural fairness. UN member states that rejected the G4 proposal, or came forward with competing proposals, not only justified their rejection or their alternative proposals overwhelmingly in procedural terms. They also managed to rebut the G4 claims of enhanced representation so as to advance their own procedural justifications – accountability, transparency, regional rotation and better representation of African states – that finally won broader rhetorical support. The next section provides empirical evidence for this claim.

Empirical analysis

Data and operationalization

To empirically substantiate our argument, we analyze the 2005 UNGA debate on Security Council reform in which the G4 presented their proposal in the form of a draft resolution. As a response, two groups, namely the Uniting for Consensus (UfC) group and the African Group, submitted rival proposals, also as draft resolutions. This debate is particularly useful for our purpose. The GA is the main forum in which states address common issues 'in ways that legitimate or delegitimize state conduct' (Abbott and Snidal, 1998, p. 24). The 2005 debate has so far been the key debate on Security Council reform, as an important window of opportunity had opened prior to the UN World summit in the autumn of that year (Von Freiesleben, 2013). Furthermore, the debate is particularly insightful as the G4 and their competitors not only justify their reform proposals, but UN member states also state whether they accept or reject those justifications as legitimate, and why. Thus, the debate provides us with an opportunity to observe how norms compete with each other as actors try to make them focal, and how some norms prevail while others do not (see Rost Rublee, 2009). Of course, we cannot know whether the expressed justifications of UN member states are sincere in that states truly believe in the importance of institutional performance or democratic procedures of the Council, or whether they justify their support for or opposition to a proposal because they believe their justifications resonate with the relevant audience. This is less of a problem, however, because rhetorical coercion does not require actors to believe in what they say or persuade each other, but to be able to rhetorically outmaneuver their opponents.

From 11–26 July 2005, the GA held a debate on the *Question of equitable representation on and increase in the membership of the Security Council and related matters* in which UN member states discussed the draft resolution that the G4 (along with its co-sponsors) had submitted on 6 July. ³ The proposal envisaged an expansion of the Council by adding six permanent seats – four for the G4 plus two for African states – and four non-permanent seats – one for Asia, Africa, Latin America and Eastern Europe, respectively. Originally, the G4 had demanded to extend the veto right to the new permanent members, but they accepted to forego this for at least 15 years. The G4 proposal also provided for a set of improvements of the Council working methods – ranging from open Council meetings to timely consultations with troop contributing countries, submitting special reports to the GA and a review of the amendments after 15 years.

To investigate our claim that the G4 failed to apply a rhetorical strategy that would have coerced the P5 and two thirds of the UN membership to support their reform proposal, we assess for each state that participated in the debate (altogether 52 states), ⁴ whether it justified its position on the proposal with reference to performance- or procedures-based arguments, or by referring to both grounds of legitimacy equally. ⁵ Performance-based arguments refer to the implications of the proposed reform for the Council's ability to adopt resolutions, ensure compliance with and implementation of its decisions, remain committed to the issues on its agenda, and to generally fulfill its mandate. Thus, critics of the reform proposal could, for instance, warn that the G4's reform proposal might complicate Council decision-making as it increases the number of veto players, while the G4 might justify their proposal arguing that their resources would help secure implementation of the Council's decisions. Procedures-based arguments, by contrast, refer to implications of the proposed reform for the Council's representativeness, its working methods, its accountability provisions, and the sovereign equality of UN member states. Accordingly, the G4 might justify their proposal claiming that it enhances the representation of states of the global South in the Council, while critics might reject the proposal arguing that the proposed reforms to the Council's accountability provisions amount to nothing more than window-dressing. Sometimes, speakers combine elements of performance- and procedures-based arguments in one argument, for example, when they assert that improvements to the Council's procedures will have a positive effect on the Council's performance. If an argument displays this pattern, we count the argument as a mixed argument.

Finally, when assessing whether speakers provide predominantly performance- or procedures-based justifications, or both types of justifications in equal measure, we primarily take into account how much time (or space, in the debate's transcripts) speakers devoted to each type of argument. In cases in which this criterion proves inconclusive, we also consider the emphasis put on each type of argument, taking both direct and indirect forms of emphasis into account. ⁶ We provide examples of coded statements as well as a summary of the results in the online appendix.

Brazil, Germany, India, Japan

All four G4 members justified their reform proposal mostly with performance-based arguments. Brazil and Japan put a strong emphasis on that the proposal would improve the Council's performance. *Brazil* introduced the draft resolution and started out by arguing that the current international security structure built around the UN Security Council was 'glaringly outdated'. Specifically, it pointed to a 'sense of urgency in promoting the Organization's effectiveness in all areas, particularly in the field of the maintenance of peace and security' and argued that reform was needed for the Council to 'effectively carry out its functions and exercise its powers'. Subsequently, Brazil also asserted that '(i)t is clear that the Council's future effectiveness is also contingent upon the permanent presence of major financial contributors and those who are most willing and able to contribute to the work of the United Nations'.⁷ Finally, it emphasized that Council reform would lead to 'more systematic and effective compliance with the Council's decisions'.⁸ Japan replicated Brazil's performance-based arguments. Only once did it point to improving the Council's representativeness.⁹ Other than that, Japan argued that the Council 'must be provided with adequate resources to address challenges effectively', and that '[c]ountries with the will and resources to play a major role in international peace and security must always take part in the Council's decision-making process'.¹⁰ It also maintained that permanent membership was not a privilege but a 'duty and responsibility for nations that are willing and able to contribute effectively to international peace and security'.¹¹

Germany and India put an, albeit less pronounced, emphasis on performance-based arguments, too. Germany claimed that the G4 proposal 'would strengthen the problem-solving capacity of the Security Council', which 'would be in the interests of everyone'.¹² Germany also emphasized that 'reform of the Council would strengthen the United Nations and its ability to address the threats and challenges of the twenty-first century'.¹³ And, responding to criticism that was levelled against the G4 during the debate, Germany argued that the suggested expansion of the Council to 25 members would not undermine but strengthen the body's effectiveness. Germany argued that 'some of those who oppose expanding the Council to 25 members ... would certainly disagree with the notion that the NATO Council has become less effective since it was expanded to 26 members'.¹⁴ At the same time, Germany justified the proposal also with reference to its suggested procedural improvements, pointing out that it would include a reform of the Council's working methods and would give UN member states a 'tool to review the Council's composition'.¹⁵ India had not planned to contribute to the debate, but decided to intervene to basically rail against states that had voiced opposition. India justified the proposal only briefly in terms of both grounds of legitimacy, arguing among others that the proposed review clause would make it possible to hold permanent members 'accountable for their performance'¹⁶ and that a more representative Council would 'reach decisions acceptable to the broad majority of the general membership'.¹⁷

Overall, the G4 put strong emphasis on enhanced Council performance. The group focused its rhetorical strategy on how the G4's economic power and material contributions to the UN would make a difference to the Council's effectiveness and compliance with its decisions, and less on how the reform would improve the quality of the Council's procedures. To what extent were the targeted audiences rhetorically coerced to express acceptance?

The permanent members

As noted, any Security Council reform requires the support (or at least the acquiescence) of all five permanent members. Two permanent members – France and United Kingdom (UK) – publicly supported the G4 proposal in the debate and even acted as co-sponsors of the draft resolution, though some suspect that they supported the resolution in order to stifle demands for a common European Union seat (Stedman, 2007). France expressed acceptance of the G4's performance-based justifications, highlighting that the growing 'list of crises on the Council's agenda' made it essential 'that we enhance the Council's effectiveness' by extending membership 'to other Powers that can make a major contribution to international peace and security'.¹⁸ The UK put more emphasis on procedural justifications, underlining that an enlarged Council would be more representative and that the UK wanted a more 'transparent' Council and one that 'consults more effectively with the wider membership'.¹⁹ The UK also expressed its reservations about the veto right for new permanent members. Performance-based justifications figured prominently in the UK's statements as well: A reformed Council would 'revitalize' the UN by making its organs 'capable of delivering'.²⁰

The US, China and Russia rejected the G4 proposal. The US publicly supported a permanent seat for Japan and India, but was unwilling to concede a permanent seat to Germany in light of the controversy over the invasion of Iraq two years earlier (Stedman, 2007). Like the G4, the US used performance-based arguments to defend its position. It made clear it supported a reform that would make the Council 'more effective' in confronting security challenges that could only be addressed 'by active, effective, multilateral institutions'. However, it expressed its staunch opposition against the G4 proposal as it 'would make the Council less effective than it is today', warning that an expansion must not make the Council 'so large that it becomes ineffective'.²¹ China, in contrast, rejected the G4 proposal with reference to its failure to convincingly address shortcomings to the Council's procedures. It argued that the Council needed to give voice to developing countries that are 'seriously underrepresented on the Security Council'.²² Russia's rhetorical strategy occupied a middle ground, with Russia substantiating its rejection with performance-based and procedural arguments. Russia underlined that Council reform should produce a 'more balanced Council membership by including major and influential developing countries', while cautioning that making the Council 'more representative must not undermine its effectiveness'.²³ Thus, neither China nor Russia opted for a rhetorical strategy that would have challenged the G4 on the rhetorical terrain of performance legitimacy chosen by the G4.

Taken together, the G4 have failed to rhetorically coerce the P5 as a group into publicly supporting their reform proposal. The G4's two supporters – France and UK – echoed the G4's performance-based justifications, but, in the case of the UK, also voiced procedural justifications for their support. Among the remaining P5 members opposing their proposal, the G4's performance-based arguments

were not met with approval. Either opponents uttered procedural justifications to reject the G4 proposal, or, if they treated performance as a valid criterion for judging the reform proposal, they turned the G4's argument around, claiming that the proposed extension to 25 members would make the Council *less* effective.

The wider UN membership

The P5 are just one audience of the G4's rhetorical coercion strategy, the second – arguably more important one – being the wider UN membership. The G4 argued that the support of two thirds of UN member states for their proposal would make it politically very difficult for the P5 to put in a veto. This is precisely what had happened in 1965 when the permanent members were opposed to the extension of Council membership from six to ten non-permanent seats but ultimately had to give in, in light of strong support for Security Council reform in the GA (Von Freiesleben, 2013). After all, the Security Council has value for the P5 only to the extent that the UN membership accepts its authority. To what extent did UN member states express support for the G4 proposal, and based on what justifications?

Of the supporters, 18 of the 52 states participating in the debate expressed support for the G4's proposal. ²⁴ Among these, one third primarily echoed the G4' performance-based justifications, one third made performance- and procedures-based arguments in equal measure, and one third made predominantly procedural arguments. Belgium, Czech Republic, Latvia, Palau, Samoa and Ukraine rhetorically endorsed the G4's performance-based arguments. ²⁵ Belgium, for example, said that 'one may wonder why a country such as Belgium would support the creation of new permanent seats. Quite simply, we believe that the presence of permanent members makes the Council effective in managing issues affecting international peace and security'. ²⁶ Denmark, Fiji, Greece, Lithuania, Poland and Tuvalu also voiced support for the G4 proposal, but provided performance- and procedures-based justifications even-handedly. ²⁷ Poland stated, for instance, that 'what we need is a stronger and more efficient Security Council – a Council which is able to take decisions and has the authority to ensure that they are fully implemented' and that it accepted 'the aspirations of those countries that make important contributions to the United Nations system'. ²⁸ But Poland also put strong emphasis on the procedural aspects of the proposal, underlining that a more representative Council would adopt more legitimate and effectively implemented decisions. ²⁹ Bhutan, Haiti, Iceland, Jordan, Norway, and Portugal supported the draft, too, but they justified their support predominantly by picking up the few procedural arguments the G4 had offered. ³⁰ Iceland, for example, justified its support by strongly emphasizing better representation for African and small states and proposed improvements of the Council's working methods. ³¹

Overall, the G4's performance-based justifications resonated with a number of UN member states. Roughly one third of the states backing the G4 proposal justified their support in terms of increased performance, and a similar share of supporters employed performance and procedures-based justifications in equal measure. However, even within the group of supporters, traction of performance-based arguments was limited in that the remaining third mostly opted for procedural arguments.

Of the opponents, 22 states rejected the G4 reform proposal. Some states, or groups of states, even put forward competing reform plans. One such group was the UfC group. The UfC comprises regional rivals of the G4, namely Argentina, Italy, Pakistan, and the Republic of Korea, but it also includes Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, Malta, Mexico, San Marina and Turkey, and thus states that have no obvious regional power aspirations nor any ambition for a permanent seat. The African Group, composed of African Union members, came up with a counter-proposal as well. Finally, also a number of unaffiliated states were opposed to the G4 proposal. The vast majority of the G4's opponents ignored or openly rejected the G4's performance-based justification and they overwhelmingly justified their opposition to the G4 proposal or their competing proposals in procedural terms.

In response to the G4 draft resolution, the UfC group tabled a competing draft resolution that envisaged to expanding the Council to 25 members (20 of them non-permanent) and to distributing the elected seats evenly among the regions, leaving it to each region to select candidates. ³² Most UfC members criticized the G4 proposal and justified their own counter-proposal invoking procedural grounds. Canada, for instance, justified its rejection with 'the emergence of values that are now fostered and cherished here and throughout the world: values such as democracy, accountability, flexibility and fairness – values that do not favour a widened notion of two-tiered privileges'. It added that 'the Council of 1945 must be seen as an anomaly to be accommodated, not as a model to be emulated'. ³³ The UfC proposal, by contrast, would make the Council accountable ('Permanence is the polar opposite of accountability') and fair. ³⁴ Canada did not make any mention of improved Council performance as an objective of the UfC proposal. Pakistan, with Italy the main protagonist of the group, accused the G4 of seeking 'new and unequal privileges for themselves'. ³⁵ 'To add insult to injury', Pakistan complained, 'self-interest has been portrayed as altruism. The seekers of special privileges and power masquerade as the champions of the weak and the disadvantaged'. Pakistan also lamented that the G4 proposal 'would erode, not enhance, democracy and accountability in the Security Council'. ³⁶ Instead, Pakistan argued, the UfC proposal was 'fair and equitable', would increase the Council's 'representativeness' and 'enhance accountability, through the mechanism of periodic elections and re-elections'. ³⁷ Like Canada, Pakistan did not justify the UfC proposal in terms of enhanced effectiveness. Colombia, Costa Rica, Italy, Mexico, Spain and Turkey also justified both their rejection of the G4 proposal and their support for the UfC proposal strongly in procedural terms. ³⁸ Argentina, Republic of Korea and San Marino used procedural and performance-based arguments in equal measure. No UfC member made primarily performance-based arguments to criticize the G4 proposal or justify their own counter-proposal. ³⁹

The African Group also rejected the G4 bid and presented its own rival proposal. ⁴⁰ Like the G4, the African Group demanded an enlargement in both membership categories. They were massively wooed by the G4 and at times it seemed as if some African states would break rank with the African Group (Von Freisesleben, 2013). However, the African Group put strong emphasis on the fact that Africa was the only region not being represented through a permanent seat on the Council. The African Group called for two permanent seats with the right of veto and five non-permanent Council seats for African states. It was deeply divided, however, about which states should obtain the permanent seats. The rhetorical strategy chosen by African Group members to justify the rejection of the G4 proposal and advertise their own proposal was strikingly similar to that of the UfC, with most countries making predominantly procedural arguments, a small subset of countries making procedural and performance-based arguments in roughly equal measure, and no country privileging performance-based arguments. Among the six states that spoke on behalf of the group, Algeria, Burkina Faso, Mauritius and South Africa put strong emphasis on *procedural* justifications. ⁴¹ South Africa, for instance, did not refer to performance at all, arguing instead that the African Group proposal would make the Council more transparent, accountable and representative, which was especially important given that African states were a frequent target of Council action. ⁴² Egypt and Nigeria justified their position by making procedural claims, too, but they added performance-based claims. ⁴³ Nigeria, for example, argued that the proposed new distribution of seats 'should ensure greater representation of the developing countries, whilst taking account of some key players with significant contributions to make to the advancement of the goals and objectives of the United Nations'. ⁴⁴

Finally, the G4 proposal was also rejected by five unaffiliated UN member states. If treated as a group, these states displayed the same rhetorical justificatory pattern as the UfC and the African Group: Four states predominantly used procedural arguments, with Indonesia warning of an 'underrepresentation for Asia', ⁴⁵ New Zealand and Uruguay demanding stronger accountability, ⁴⁶ and Switzerland promoting a proposal that focused on improved working methods. ⁴⁷ Only the Netherlands made equally procedural and performance-based arguments, acknowledging that the G4 were 'capable of ... shouldering the extra burden of promoting global security', whilst opposing the extension of the veto right. ⁴⁸

We can summarize our findings as follows: The G4 have justified their Security Council reform proposal strongly in terms of improving the Council's performance and less so in terms of procedural fairness. While some UN members expressed acceptance of the performance argument, it was not strong enough a justification. The opponents of the G4 focused mostly on procedural legitimacy and therefore situated the debate on a legitimacy terrain that was less favorable to the G4. The G4's main procedural justification was increased representation, a weak point given that adding states like Germany and Japan to the permanent members does not do much to increase the Council's representativeness. The opponents of the G4 rejected the G4 proposal mostly in procedural terms, putting much more emphasis on enhancing the fairness and democratic quality of the Council's procedures. They criticized the veto right for new permanent members, advocated a regular, binding review mechanism to ensure the accountability of new permanent members, and demanded further improvements of the Council's working methods. In terms of representation, most states advocated the inclusion of developing countries, in particular African states, or regional rotation of non-permanent members.

Brazil, Germany, India and Japan's strategy of rhetorical coercion thus failed to limit the space for contestation. As noted, rhetorical coercion depends on an agreement on what norms are valid and what the dominant norms in a community are (Krebs and Jackson, 2007; Goddard, 2009). However, there is no consensus among states as to whether the legitimacy of international institutions rather derives from performance or procedural fairness. Rather, one legitimacy standard enjoys greater acceptance among UN member states – but it is procedural fairness and not institutional performance, as the G4's rhetorical strategy would have suggested and as most accounts of the legitimation of international institutions assume. As the G4's opponents used the available rhetorical space to focus the discourse not on the issue of performance but on procedural fairness, the G4 was deprived of the opportunity to rhetorically entrap their opponents by pointing out that their opponents had likewise previously called for improvements to the Council's performance. If anything, it was the G4's critics that managed to capitalize on rhetorical traps, as the G4 felt the need to justify their proposal in terms of procedural fairness and especially representativeness – which opened the door for their opponents to rebut the G4 proposal on procedural grounds. This did not mean that either the UfC or the African Group would have been able to round up sufficient support for their own reform proposal – as this would have at least required both groups to agree on a common proposal. ⁴⁹ Yet, it entailed that the G4's rhetorical coercion strategy fell through.

Conclusion

This article sought to contribute to the framework outlined in the Introduction to this special issue (Kruck and Zangl, this issue) by looking at a strategy of institutional change available to rising powers that has so far received little attention – rhetorical coercion (see also Fioretos, this issue; Goddard, this issue; MacDonald, this issue). Focusing on the debate about UN Security Council reform, we have shown that debates about institutional reform involve struggles over legitimacy. The G4 have lost this struggle over legitimacy because their rhetorical strategy was unsuccessful in closing off the possibility of justifiable rebuttal for their opponents.

Since 2005, the debate on Security Council reform in the GA has dragged along. Yet, there is little indication that the G4 have significantly changed their rhetorical strategy. For instance, in the latest debate in 2018, G4 members acknowledge the benefits of greater representativeness, but they continue to justify their reform proposal mainly with performance-based arguments. At the same time, frustrated with the delay of the opening of text-based negotiations, the G4 meanwhile increasingly focus on making proposals as to how to get such negotiations started, rather than providing justifications for the reform proposal itself. ⁵⁰ Hence, with the window of opportunity from 2005 closed, momentum is being lost for the G4 to apply a strategy of rhetorical coercion to bolster their claim to

Security Council reform. If a new window opens, for instance at the beginning of text-based negotiations, we should, however, again observe the group devise such a strategy in an effort to make their opponents publicly endorse their position.

Our analysis has implications for how and why rising powers apply rhetorical coercion in response to power shifts and suggests avenues for future research. First, our results suggest that a rhetorical coercion strategy that strongly relies on performance-based justifications is unlikely to resonate among relevant audiences whose acceptance of institutional adaptations is required. Rather, because such justifications do not effectively narrow the space for contestation, targeted audiences can rebut the justifications by drawing on procedural arguments. Recent scholarship finds that procedural fairness has become the dominant legitimation standard for international organizations (IOs) (Dellmuth et al., 2019; Dingwerth et al., 2019), giving us reason to believe that this finding applies to struggles over institutional adaptation in other IOs. However, the importance many states put on procedural fairness might also be due to the peculiarities of the Security Council, such as its vast power and symbolic value. Future research should therefore examine similar reform debates in other IOs to learn more about how rhetorical coercion is applied by rising powers.

Second, rhetoric is not endlessly malleable. For the G4 it would have been rational to devise a rhetorical coercion strategy composed primarily of procedures-based arguments. The G4 used procedures-based justifications, but they mostly made performance-based arguments even though they were widely rejected – and, as the reference to the 2018 debate above suggests, they stuck to this rhetorical pattern for years. One explanation could be that the G4 did not know about other states' concerns or that they did not really listen during the debates, which is not very plausible. ⁵¹ This suggests that rhetorical coercion is unlikely to succeed as a strategy of institutional adaptation if the proposed reform grants privileges to a small group of selected states. Yet, it also suggests that rhetorical coercion might be a more effective strategy of institutional adaptation if it is employed by a larger and more heterogeneous group that bids for reforms which would lead to a more equal distribution of privileges. Future research should therefore compare the success of different types of attempts at rhetorical coercion across different types of actors.

Finally, why have the G4 after 2005 stuck to a strategy that was ineffective in that it did not sufficiently resonate with the target audience? One possible explanation is that the G4 cared that much about the reform and were convinced of the rightfulness and importance of their claim to an extent that giving up was simply not an option. However, the continuation of the G4's reform campaign might also fulfil additional functions for its members (see also Stephen, 2015). The G4 might remain with their rhetorical coercion strategy because it is a vehicle for them to signal to other states that they claim great power status. They might never be granted permanent seats, but the debate offers them a forum to send a strong signal to the global public that they belong to the elite club of privileged states of high status (see Ward, 2017). At the same time, the ritual of claiming a seat at the table and the status of a great power might not only be outward oriented but it might also be inward oriented. Thus, by claiming that they belong to the inner circle of great powers and that their acceptance in this inner circle makes a global organization like the UN perform better, the G4 might also reassure themselves that their right to special entitlements is legitimate. Again, even if the entitlements are never granted and acceptance to the inner circle is refused, the ritual of the debate might still be valuable for the G4 to reassure themselves of their self-ascribed identity as a great power that deserves privileges (see Barker, 2001). As a result, attempts at rhetorical coercion post 2005 might not lead to institutional adaption, but the mere utterance of performance-related justifications might serve other important functions for the G4, and, as future research might explore, potentially other rising powers in their search for their place in the world.

Notes

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2 These are not the only grounds of legitimacy, but arguably the major ones. For example, Binder and Heupel (2015) add legal legitimacy while Tallberg and Zürn (2019) add authority.

3 A/59/L.64.

4 Madagascar participated in the debate as well, but it did not state its position or provide any justification.

5 Occasionally, states made additional justificatory claims, including the upcoming UN world summit, requests by the Secretary-General to deliver reform, or support from a heterogeneous group of states. However, the great majority of arguments refers to either the Council's procedures or its performance (or both).

6 For instance, a speaker explicitly stating that she considers performance-based arguments particularly compelling would be an example of direct emphasis. Exposing less explicit forms of emphasis is more challenging and requires considering each oral contribution in its entirety. However, as a general guidance, the use of strong adjectives and illustrative examples might be an example of indirect emphasis, as might be the placement of an argument at the very beginning or the very end of the statement.

7 This statement by Brazil and similar statements by other G4 members are no attempts at strategic cooptation – an alternative mechanism of institutional adaptation presented in the introduction to this special issue – as the G4 did not make material contributions to the Council conditional on Council reform or issue credible threats in this regard.

8 A/59/PV.111, p. 2. To a lesser extent, Brazil also made procedural arguments. It argued that '[r]epresentativeness and equitable participation must be clearly reflected in the composition of the Security Council'. Brazil also claimed that the selection of the new permanent members by the GA and the envisaged review process would 'establish a direct link of accountability between the new permanent members and the general membership' (A/59/PV.111, p. 2).

9 A/59/PV.111, p. 4.

10 A/59/PV.111, p. 4.

11 A/59/PV.111, p. 5.

12 A/59/PV.112, p. 13.

13 A/59/PV.112, p.14.

14 A/59/PV.112, p. 13.

15 A/59/PV.112, p. 13.
 16 A/59/PV.112, p. 27.
 17 A/59/PV.112, p. 29.
 18 A/59/PV.111, p. 11. France alluded only very briefly to improving the Council's representativeness by adding permanent seats for African states.
 19 A/59/PV.112, p. 19.
 20 A/59/PV.112, pp. 19-20.
 21 A/59/PV.112, pp. 9-10.
 22 A/59/PV.111, p. 13. Some explain China's opposition to the proposal by its fierce resistance to Japan's permanent membership, with Sino-Japanese relations being particularly sour at the time.
 23 A/59/PV.112, p. 8.
 24 Chile, Finland and Sweden provided some rhetorical support to the proposal, but they expressed criticism as well and fell short of explicitly endorsing the proposal (A/59/PV/111, p. 18-19 and A/59/PV/112, p. 6).
 25 A/59/PV.111, pp. 22-23 and A/59/112, pp. 4-7, 14, 18-20, 22-23.
 26 A/59/PV.112, p. 4.
 27 A/59/PV.111, pp. 12-15, 19-20, 22 and A/59/PV.112, pp. 5, 16-17.
 28 A/59/PV.111, p. 15.
 29 A/59/PV.111, p. 15.
 30 A/59/PV.111, pp. 4, 11-12, 23 and A/59/PV.112, pp. 17-18, 24-25.
 31 A/59/PV.111, pp. 11-12.
 32 A/59/L.68.
 33 A/59/PV.112: p. 2.
 34 A/59/PV.115, pp. 1-2.
 35 A/59/PV.111, p. 8.
 36 A/59/PV.111, p. 8. Pakistan mentioned performance only once, claiming that the G4 proposal would 'reduce, not improve, the effectiveness and the efficiency of the Security Council by requiring the constant reconciliation of the interests of 11, instead of 5, permanent members' (A/59/PV.111, p. 8).
 37 A/59/PV.115, p. 6.
 38 A/59/PV.111, p. 17, A/59/PV.112, pp. 14, 21-22, 25 and A/59/PV.115, pp. 3-5.
 39 A/59/PV.111, pp. 15, 19 and A/59/PV.112, pp. 10-12.
 40 A/59/L.67, co-sponsored by 44 African states.
 41 A/59/PV.111, pp. 6-7, 12, A/59/PV.112, p. 30 and A/59/PV.114, pp. 4-6.
 42 A/59/PV.114, p. 5.
 43 A/59/PV.114, pp. 1-4.
 44 A/59/PV.114, p. 2.
 45 A/59/PV.112: p. 21.
 46 A/59/PV.112, p. 3.
 47 A/59/PV.111, p. 21.
 48 A/59/PV.112, p. 8.
 49 That the UfC and the African Group failed to agree on a common reform proposal suggests that both groups were primarily interested in obstructing the G4 reform bid rather than getting a reform proposal through that would have required substantial compromise (e.g. Swart, 2013) – and that they thus behaved akin to Bloomfield and Scott's (2017, p. 3) 'creative resisters' who may use 'delaying tactics to ... sap the momentum for change'.
 50 A/73/PV.36: pp. 8-9, 16-17, 21-11 and A/73/PV.37, pp. 18-19.
 51 See, for instance, the following statement by Pakistan: 'The views of Pakistan and other Uniting for Consensus members on draft resolution A/59/L.64 is no secret. We oppose it for several reasons.' – which is followed by a long list of mostly procedures-based arguments (A/59/PV.111, pp. 8-9).

Biographies

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Supporting Information



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