



Heidegger and the Ontology of UN Decision-Making: A Reinterpretation of Security Council Practices

Zhetong Zhang

Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 201620, China
0231137004@shisu.edu.cn

Abstract. This paper develops a Heideggerian ontological framework for rethinking decision-making in the United Nations Security Council, arguing that the Council's procedures do more than regulate international behaviour; they also participate in disclosing the conditions under which global political reality becomes intelligible. Mainstream International Relations (IR) theories—realism, liberal institutionalism, and constructivism—explain outcomes in terms of power, cooperation, or norms, yet largely presuppose the ontological categories of sovereignty, legitimacy, and threat. Drawing on Heidegger's concepts of being-in-the-world, worldhood, and readiness-to-hand, the paper conceptualizes the Security Council as a site of world-disclosure in which diplomatic practices, procedural rules, and institutional language actively constitute the horizon of global political intelligibility. Voting, veto power, informal consultations, and resolution drafting are thus understood not as neutral instruments but as practices that shape what counts as politically meaningful. This is illustrated through the 2003 Iraq War crisis, where disputes over authorization revealed competing disclosures of "threat" and "legitimate action," and where the breakdown of consensus functioned as ontological disclosure by making visible the tension between effectiveness and legality that sustains collective security. The Council's decision-making should therefore be understood as a process of world-formation in which global political reality is continuously disclosed, contested, and reconstituted.

Keywords: Heidegger; ontology; United Nations Security Council; world-disclosure; International Relations theory.

1 Introduction

No institution parallels the UN Security Council in contemporary world politics. Created in 1945 with primary responsibility for international peace and security, it holds unique authority to adopt binding decisions, impose sanctions, and authorize military force. Its design—five veto-wielding permanent members and ten rotating elected seats—has generated elaborate procedures for deliberation and collective choice. Yet one philosophical question remains insufficiently confronted: what background assumptions about political life must already be in place for the Council's decision-making mechanisms to appear intelligible at all?

Mainstream IR traditions have not been silent. Realists read the Council as an arena of power politics: classical realists emphasize great-power competition, while structural realists trace outcomes to anarchy and the distribution of material capabilities [1, 2]. Neoliberal institutionalists counter that the Council can foster cooperation by reducing transaction costs and stabilizing expectations [3]. Constructivists add that its reality is socially built through norms and shared meanings, its procedures invested with legitimacy through practice [4–6]. These perspectives yield valuable insights, yet they conceptualize the Council as a strategic arena, rule-governed system, or social structure, leaving largely untouched the deeper ontological conditions that give such structures their meaning. This shortcoming has spurred an "ontological turn" in IR—an effort to investigate the deeper structures of meaning that render political phenomena possible [7–9]. The present study locates its contribution within this turn.

Drawing on the existential phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, the study departs from his central insight in *Being and Time*: that human existence (*Dasein*) is fundamentally being-in-the-world, always already immersed in a structured context of significance before any theoretical reflection [10]. On this view, the world is not a neutral container but a meaningful totality within which entities appear as what they are. Through this ontological lens, the Council becomes more than a mechanism for coordinating state interests. It can be analysed as a historically specific mode of world-disclosure whose decision-making routines—the veto, informal consultations, penholding, resolution drafting—emerge as practical expressions of a broader world-structure in which sovereign states appear as the natural building blocks of political reality, internally differentiated by a constitutionally entrenched hierarchy. Heidegger's analysis of everyday practical activity supplies another resource: he distinguishes between things encountered as objects of theoretical inspection and those engaged with as handy equipment woven into ongoing activity. Many Council mechanisms function less as abstract legal structures than as practical tools within daily diplomatic routines; it is when something breaks down—a public collision of vetoes, a deep procedural crisis—that the hidden ontological scaffolding jumps out.

This paper investigates the Council's decision-making mechanisms through Heideggerian ontology, aiming to lay bare the deeper assumptions behind the Council's production of global political intelligibility. The central claim is that its decision-making system expresses a historically specific world in which sovereign statehood, diplomatic negotiation, and institutionalized hierarchy have come to appear as the natural furniture of political life. The point is not to add another layer to existing theories but to shift analytical attention toward the conditions that make Security Council authority possible at all.

The paper proceeds in four steps. A first section reviews the literature on ontology in IR and Security Council governance, isolating the theoretical gap. A second section elaborates the Heideggerian framework, calibrating key concepts for the study of Council practices. A third section applies that framework, using the 2003 Iraq crisis as a sustained illustration while also attending to non-crisis routines of world-disclosure. A fourth section draws out wider implications for debates on sovereignty, legitimacy, and reform.

2 Literature Review

Mainstream IR has long explained the Security Council through competing paradigms of power, institutions, and norms. Realism encompasses several strands: classical realism emphasizes great-power struggles, structural realism explains outcomes through anarchy and the distribution of capabilities, and offensive/defensive variants debate whether states maximize power or seek adequate security [1, 2, 11, 12]. Despite their diversity, realist traditions share a common ontological premise: states appear as pre-constituted strategic actors, and Council procedures are treated as derivative of these prior realities. Liberal approaches are equally differentiated. Neoliberal institutionalism argues that the Council facilitates cooperation by reducing uncertainty and lengthening the shadow of the future [3]; domestic liberal theories shift attention to societal preferences [13]; democratic peace theory contends that liberal democracies relate through norms of compromise [14, 15]. These contributions enrich the study of cooperation but treat states, interests, and regimes as already constituted entities.

Constructivism emerged by emphasizing that the Council's reality is socially constructed. Wendt's formulation that "anarchy is what states make of it" redirected attention toward identities, norms, and intersubjective meanings [4, 5]. Norms research has examined how standards such as the responsibility to protect become institutionalized through Council debates [6]. Critical constructivists focus on the power relations embedded in diplomatic language [16, 17], while practice-oriented scholarship emphasizes the tacit know-how that sustains informal consultations and drafting sessions [18]. This last development moves close to Heideggerian concerns, yet even here the deeper phenomenological question of worldhood—the horizon within which the veto, the resolution, or the threat designation become intelligible—often remains underdeveloped.

It is precisely this limitation that the ontological turn in IR seeks to overcome, foregrounding what kinds of entities populate world politics and how they become recognizable within historically contingent frameworks of meaning [7–9]. Within this movement, Heideggerian phenomenology offers a radical reconfiguration of ontology. A growing strand of IR scholarship has drawn on these themes: van der Ree applies Heidegger's concept at the macro-structural level to reconceive the international system [19]; Hom focuses on temporality and existential decision [20]; Paipais interprets international thought as ontological contest over order [9]. Collectively, these works move IR toward a phenomenological account of global reality, yet they require closer connection to concrete institutional mechanisms—a gap this study addresses.

Several bodies of literature have specifically addressed the Council as an institution. Bosco provides a detailed history of its evolution as a great-power concert [21], Hurd examines how legitimacy underpins compliance [22], Voeten analyses the Council's ability to legitimize the use of force [23], and Barnett and Finnemore treat international organizations as bureaucratic actors exercising power through rules and classification [24]. While these works offer indispensable empirical richness, they explain how the Council operates without interrogating the ontological conditions that

allow categories such as “threat” or “legitimate authorization” to appear as meaningful. Ontological security studies similarly focus on state identity [25, 26], asking how actors preserve identity but less often how the Council itself stabilizes the horizons of meaning within which such identities become possible. Consequently, the relationship between the Council’s procedural fabric and ontological world-formation remains underexplored. A Heideggerian framework allows the Council’s decision-making to be interpreted as a historically specific mode of world-disclosure through which modern political order is continuously constituted, stabilized, and contested.

3 Theoretical Framework: Mapping Heidegger onto United Nations Decision-Making

This study employs Heidegger as an interpretive ontology concerned with the conditions under which the Council’s decision-making procedures become meaningful. From this standpoint, the Security Council is a site of world-disclosure: a structured institutional field within which categories such as peace, threat, legitimacy, and sovereignty acquire practical significance through historically sedimented forms of action and interpretation [7, 8, 10]. The distinctive value of Heidegger lies in his reorientation of inquiry away from entities as self-evident objects and toward the background horizon that allows entities to appear as what they are. Applied to IR, the Council should not be treated only as an empirical unit requiring causal explanation; it also helps reproduce the world in which such coordination appears as legitimate and intelligible [7, 9].

Two preliminary clarifications are necessary. First, the application of Heideggerian concepts to an institutional setting operates on two complementary levels: the Council’s world-disclosing function is enacted through the practices of diplomats and officials whose shared pre-reflective competence sustains a common horizon of intelligibility, practices that have sedimented over decades into durable institutional forms that confront new participants as already existing structures of meaning. Second, “world-disclosure” is used in a specific sense: it refers to the way the Council’s practices, interpretive frameworks, and institutional language sustain a horizon of intelligibility that is neither simply “found” in an independently existing reality nor arbitrarily “produced” by institutional fiat. It is a historically sedimented, ongoing process in which certain ways of understanding are opened up and maintained while others are foreclosed. The 2003 Iraq case examined later is a particularly visible instance of disclosure precisely because the breakdown of the Council’s interpretive horizon rendered explicit what ordinarily remains in the background.

Core Heideggerian concepts illuminate how the Council functions as an ontological site. *Dasein* designates the kind of being whose mode of existence is characterized by understanding and interpretation [10]. Although the Council itself is not a *Dasein*, the actors who inhabit it act within prior understandings of what counts as a lawful argument, a legitimate procedure, or a responsible exercise of the veto [22,

24]. Being-in-the-world insists that existence is an already embedded mode of dwelling within a meaningful totality of relations. Diplomacy thus does not occur in a neutral procedural vacuum; political actors appear within structured identities—permanent members, elected members, penholders, troop-contributing countries—that shape expectations and define the horizon of political possibility [21, 23]. Worldhood names the relational structure that makes a world coherent as a totality of significance. In the Council, worldhood can be understood as the historically specific order organized around sovereign equality, collective security, and the constitutionally entrenched hierarchy of permanent membership—a dual structure in which universal membership coexists with privileged stewardship [22, 27].

Readiness-to-hand distinguishes between things encountered theoretically as objects and things encountered practically as equipment [10]. Many Council mechanisms—informal consultations, penholder arrangements, “blue” draft resolutions, no-objection procedures—operate primarily as practical instruments. Diplomats employ them fluently as part of routine political coping, and the Council’s stability depends on this background invisibility [24, 28]. When equipment malfunctions—a veto obstructs consensus, a procedural challenge arises—the previously transparent tools suddenly become conspicuous and reveal the practical network in which they normally recede. Das Man (“the They”) refers to the anonymous public norms through which everyday conduct is standardized [10]. Within the Council, this appears in formulaic diplomatic language—“deeply concerned,” “all parties must exercise restraint”—which stabilizes expectations and enables communication across different political systems, while also diffusing responsibility into impersonal institutional speech [29, 30].

Temporality describes existence unfolding through the interrelation of future projection, past inheritance, and present involvement [10]. The Council carries the inheritance of 1945: world war, great-power compromise, and faith in collective security, embodied in permanent membership and the veto. At the same time, it is oriented toward futures through peacebuilding mandates and preventive diplomacy. Present crises interrupt and reconfigure both inheritance and projection, making decision-making a temporally layered field [31, 32]. Finally, Heidegger’s later concept of *Ge-stell* (enframing) provides a critical lens for interpreting the Council’s technocratic evolution—a mode of revealing in which beings appear primarily as resources to be measured, optimized, and controlled [33]. This tendency is visible in the growing reliance on sanctions-monitoring panels, risk assessments, and indicator-driven briefings, which risk narrowing political judgment by translating complex conflicts into administratively manageable variables.

Taken together, these concepts allow the Council to be interpreted not simply as an arena where pre-given actors pursue interests, but as a historically constituted structure of meaning. Security Council decision-making always operates on two levels simultaneously: it coordinates conduct within world politics, and it helps constitute the very world within which political conduct can appear as meaningful at all.

4 Analysis: United Nations Decision-Making as an Ontological Structure of Global Governance

Conventional approaches typically explain UN decision-making through power distribution, institutional design, or normative socialization. A Heideggerian approach poses a prior question: how do these entities become intelligible? Viewed through this lens, the UN appears as a practical structure through which a historically specific global political world is continuously disclosed, reproduced, and contested—an ontological institution that participates in shaping the horizon of intelligibility [7, 9, 10].

The post-1945 international order—organized around sovereign statehood, juridical equality, collective security, and multilateral diplomacy—constitutes the meaningful background within which behaviour becomes recognizable as legitimate, deviant, lawful, or threatening [24, 31]. When delegations invoke territorial integrity, self-defence, or the responsibility to protect, they draw upon a prior world of intelligibility sedimented in the Charter. Such categories function as conditions of appearance: they make certain claims intelligible while rendering others marginal [5, 32]. Within this framework, sovereignty can be understood not merely as a legal status but as an ontological grammar of modern politics. It determines who may speak authoritatively, who may vote, who may veto, and who bears obligations. The UN thus does not merely manage sovereign actors; it continuously reproduces sovereignty as the naturalized form of political being in global affairs [22, 24].

The contrast between the General Assembly and the Security Council makes this ontological duality visible. The General Assembly stages the world as a community of formally equal states through one-state-one-vote rituals that publicly enact the image of an international society composed of juridically equivalent units [28]. Even where actual inequalities remain profound, the procedural form discloses a world in which equal statehood is the recognized language of legitimacy. By contrast, the Security Council reveals an internally differentiated worldhood: it institutionalizes hierarchy through the veto, disclosing a political world in which universal membership coexists with privileged stewardship. The veto is not only a strategic instrument but a structural feature through which unequal authority is rendered intelligible as a legitimate principle of order [22, 34]. Reform debates are therefore so charged because they concern rival understandings of what global order ought to be, each proposal presupposing a different ontology of political order [28, 31].

Heidegger's concept of readiness-to-hand shifts attention from formal structures to practical usage. Much UN politics unfolds in routine activities: drafting operative clauses, negotiating punctuation, coordinating caucus positions, and calibrating diplomatic tone. These practices function as tools embedded in ongoing activity; participants employ them fluently without explicit reflection. Governance often depends less on constitutional design than on tacit practical competence—knowing how to signal flexibility, delay without openly obstructing, or formulate ambiguity acceptable to multiple audiences [24, 30]. Informal consultations illustrate this dynamic: many of the most consequential negotiations occur outside the public chamber, with public votes often ratifying outcomes shaped beforehand through

backstage interaction [21, 23]. The penholder system further exemplifies this practical infrastructure: a permanent member takes the lead in drafting resolutions, an arrangement nowhere in the Charter but deeply entrenched, providing the background against which other members formulate amendments. When elected members have occasionally challenged a penholder's near-monopoly over draft texts, the previously transparent tool became an object of explicit contestation, momentarily revealing the practical network that normally sustains the Council's text-production.

Heidegger notes that tools become most visible when they break down. Under ordinary conditions, procedures recede into the background. During crises of veto deadlock or contested mandates, mechanisms become objects of open struggle, revealing that institutional stability depends on tacit acceptance of procedural authority normally left unspoken [10, 28]. Yet world-disclosure is not confined to crisis. Each year, the Council adopts resolutions extending peacekeeping mandates through established penholder-driven processes and formulaic language. Precisely in their repetitive, low-salience character, they reaffirm that certain conflicts warrant collective management, that host-state sovereignty is to be respected but partially opened to international supervision, and that the Council is the appropriate body to authorize such arrangements.

Language constitutes another decisive dimension. For Heidegger, language is not a neutral medium but a mode through which worlds are disclosed; it is "the house of Being" [33]. Resolutions, presidential statements, and ambassadorial speeches classify situations, allocate responsibility, and define thresholds of urgency [29, 30]. To designate a situation as a "threat to international peace and security" opens a horizon of possible sanctions, peace operations, or force authorizations. Naming determines what appears as crisis or legitimate self-defence; conversely, non-recognition may render severe suffering politically peripheral [35]. Strategic ambiguity in UN texts further demonstrates that language often sustains a shared world precisely by allowing divergent interpretations to coexist within a common formula. The concept of *das Man* helps explain this normative texture: formulaic language stabilizes expectations and enables participation by radically different actors, even while it can depersonalize responsibility because agency is absorbed into institutional formulas no single actor fully owns [24, 30].

Temporality provides another essential dimension. The UN carries the legacy of 1945, and these past decisions continue to structure present possibilities. At the same time, UN governance is future-oriented through peacebuilding, development agendas, and preventive diplomacy, making institutional action projective. Reform debates over Council composition or peace operations express tensions between inherited structures and emerging futures. The later concept of *Ge-stell* is useful for interpreting the technocratic evolution of governance. Contemporary UN practice increasingly relies on indicators, compliance metrics, data dashboards, and risk matrices. These techniques offer advantages in coordination and accountability, yet they may also narrow political judgment by translating human worlds into administratively manageable variables—what matters risks becoming only what can be measured [24, 36].

Taken together, these dimensions show that UN decision-making operates on two levels: coordinating action within a world, and contributing to constituting that world. Realist, liberal, and constructivist explanations primarily operate at the ontic level of actors, incentives, and norms. A Heideggerian framework reveals a deeper ontological layer: the background conditions of intelligibility that allow sovereignty, legitimacy, security, and order to appear as meaningful political categories in the first place.

5 Case Study: The United Nations Security Council and the 2003 Iraq War

To demonstrate the framework's practical value, this section applies it to the crisis preceding the 2003 Iraq War—a case that condenses claims about threats, disputes over legality, institutional deadlock, and competing narratives of legitimacy [21, 28].

Following the 1991 Gulf War, Iraq remained subject to sanctions and inspections. After September 2001, the United States increasingly linked Iraq to weapons of mass destruction, terrorism, and rogue state behaviour, rearticulating it as an imminent global danger [29, 30]. In November 2002, the Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1441, declaring Iraq in “material breach” and offering a “final opportunity” to comply. Yet the resolution became the central object of political struggle [23]. The deeper conflict was not only strategic but ontological: the Council was struggling over what kind of reality Iraq represented and what forms of action could be legitimate. The first ontological issue concerned the constitution of “threat.” The United States sought to disclose Iraq as an imminent danger whose very uncertainty justified preventive action—a logic structurally resembling, but not equivalent to, the temporal dynamic Heidegger analysed, where the sheer possibility of a catastrophic future becomes the basis for present action. Other Council members advanced a different temporal logic: uncertainty demanded continued verification rather than anticipatory war, grounding legitimate action in presently demonstrable facts. The disagreement thus concerned the structure of political judgment under conditions of uncertainty, reflecting differing orientations toward futurity [10, 20].

A second issue concerned institutional language. Resolution 1441's warning of “serious consequences” was deliberately ambiguous; that ambiguity was the condition of consensus. For Washington and London, it could be interpreted as reviving earlier authorization; for opponents, any lawful use of force required a second explicit resolution. The same words sustained incompatible political worlds simultaneously—a fragile ontological architecture. As pressure intensified in early 2003, this interpretive horizon began to disintegrate. The crisis also illuminates readiness-to-hand: much decisive politics unfolded in informal consultations and bilateral bargaining, depending on routine diplomatic competence [21, 23]. When it became clear that a second resolution would likely fail or face a veto, breakdown occurred. The taken-for-granted authority of Council procedure itself became an object of open contestation, disclosing the existential dependence of the Council's legitimacy on a fragile pre-reflective agreement about what collective security means in practice.

The subsequent invasion in March 2003 without fresh Council authorization exposed the tension between power and institutional worldhood. Militarily, the coalition could act unilaterally. Yet the extraordinary effort to secure UN backing showed that legitimacy, as a mode of world-disclosure in which action appears as justified, remained indispensable [22]. The Council's significance derived not from coercive capacity but from its role as a site where political reality is publicly recognized and validated. The aftermath reinforced this interpretation: as claims regarding Iraqi weapons collapsed, categories that had authorised action—imminence, necessity, enforcement—were widely contested. The Council later re-entered the post-war process through humanitarian coordination and political assistance, demonstrating that its ontological function extended beyond the moment of breakdown. The case thus demonstrates that struggles over Council authorisation are simultaneously struggles over how international order itself will be understood.

6 Discussion

The Heideggerian analysis allows Security Council decision-making to be reinterpreted as a mode of ontological world-disclosure. The Council's procedures participate in producing the conditions under which global political reality becomes intelligible. Several implications follow.

First, sovereignty emerges as a structuring condition of political intelligibility, not merely a legal attribute. The veto institutionalises a hierarchy within that order, and the debate over Council enlargement reflects rival ontologies of who should count as a responsible power [28, 31]. Second, legitimacy operates as a mode of disclosure: when the Council authorises sanctions or force, it helps define what counts as rightful action, reinforcing Hurd's insight while adding that legitimacy is ontologically constitutive [22]. The Iraq case showed that even powerful states could not ignore the Council's constitutive role in establishing the meaningfulness of military action. Third, institutional language does not merely describe reality but brings it into presence. The naming of a threat under Article 39 opens a horizon of possible responses, a process illuminated by showing how language "houses" a political world. Fourth, the analysis contributes to ontological security studies by shifting attention to institutional world-formation: states sustain narratives of themselves as responsible powers partly because the Council provides a shared framework within which such identities are recognisable. Fifth, procedural breakdown has revelatory force, but world-disclosure is not confined to crisis; routine mandate renewals and diplomatic formulas perform continuous ontological work. The 2003 case is a vivid instance, not the exclusive locus, of disclosure. Sixth, the Council's temporality means that reform debates are struggles over how the inherited world of 1945 can be reopened to new futures. Seventh, the concept of *Ge-stell* illuminates the Council's technocratic evolution: increasing reliance on indicators and dashboards is an ontological shift that risks enframing complex crises as administrative problems, displacing questions of justice that cannot easily be rendered as metrics. The critique is not anti-expertise but a call to remain attentive to the kind of world disclosed by such practices.

The framework does not reject realism, institutionalism, or constructivism. Rather, it operates at a deeper level, asking how categories such as the veto or the threat become intelligible in the first place. The veto can thus be simultaneously analysed as a power-political tool, an institutional feature securing great-power cooperation, a normatively contested symbol, and a continuous ontological enactment of a differentiated political world. Each level captures something the others miss. In sum, Security Council decision-making is also a process of ontological world-formation, which clarifies why conflicts over procedure and reform are so consequential: they are struggles over the meaning and future of international order itself.

7 Conclusion

This paper has re-examined Security Council decision-making by drawing on Heideggerian ontology. It suggests that the Council's everyday procedures are not merely instrumental mechanisms; they actively take part in disclosing the conditions under which global political reality becomes intelligible. Rather than treating the Council simply as a forum for great-power bargaining, a rule-based mechanism for cooperation, or an arena of norm contestation, the analysis insists on its character as a historically specific site of world-disclosure—where the meanings of sovereignty, legitimacy, threat, and order are continuously disclosed, stabilised, and fiercely contested.

A sustained engagement with mainstream IR theory located the contribution: realism, liberalism, and constructivism illuminate important facets but tend to operate at the ontic level, explaining how already intelligible actors interact inside familiar rules. The Heideggerian lens presses a prior question—how these actors and categories become meaningful in the first place. From this vantage point, the dense fabric of Council practice—voting, the veto, informal consultations, penholding, drafting, and routine mandate renewal—appears as world-disclosing practices. The 2003 Iraq crisis was examined in detail, showing that the dispute over authorisation involved rival disclosures of threat and legitimacy, and that institutional paralysis itself became a form of ontological disclosure, laying bare the fragile pre-reflective agreement underpinning collective security.

The contribution is twofold. Methodologically, the study demonstrates that existential phenomenology can be carefully calibrated to a specific international institution, offering a model that might be extended to comparative studies of how the General Assembly, the International Court of Justice, or regional bodies disclose distinct political worlds. Substantively, it recasts the Security Council as something more than a concert of powers: it is one of the principal sites through which the modern political world is continuously reproduced and reinterpreted. There are clear limits: a Heideggerian analysis not firmly anchored in institutional history can slip into abstraction, and the framework does not deliver tidy policy prescriptions. Yet the wider conclusion holds: grasping how the Council decides requires moving beyond the actions of states to ask how the international world itself becomes available as an intelligible space. Global security governance is not only a system of actors and rules;

it is an ontological structure through which political reality is continuously disclosed, contested, and transformed.

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