

The Language of Responsibility in the United Nations Security Council, 1946-2020

Felix S. Bethke, Felix Haass & Holger Niemann

Abstract

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the United Nations' most powerful institutional body, charged with the "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security." The main instrument through which the Council asserts this power are its resolutions, specifically by attributing responsibility in resolution text. The UNSC uses responsibility language to assign tasks, identify accountability under international law, or reflect the Council's normative interpretation of political principles. Yet we lack a comprehensive empirical description of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions. We address this gap by providing an original dataset of the full text of all UNSC resolutions between 1946-2020. We use this data to show that the Council has significantly increased responsibility attributions since the end of the Cold War, but only for a very specific subset of terms, targeting predominantly states and individuals. We further demonstrate how the data can inform debates about timing and status of the "responsibility to protect" as an international norm. The data and findings provide a helpful starting point for many future research endeavors, including the role of member states in the UNSC, quantitative and qualitative research on UNSC decision-making processes, or topic development of the UNSC agenda in general.

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Data statement

The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse, at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq>.

Introduction

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is the United Nations' most powerful institutional body, tasked with the "primary responsibility for the maintenance of international peace and security." The UNSC has the power to authorize the use of force and peace operations that can help pacify civil wars (Binder 2017; Karlsrud 2018), impose sanctions on countries or individuals (Dörfler 2020), or refer cases to the International Criminal Court to hold those accountable that perpetrate genocide, war crimes, or crimes against humanity (Arbour 2014). Considering this power, many criticize the Council when it fails to act or when its decisions appear to be nothing more than "cheap talk."

The main instrument through which the UNSC exercises power are its resolutions. Their language directly impacts international politics (Gifkins 2016). The wording of UNSC resolutions is often achieved as a result of hard-won compromises (Sievers and Daws 2014, 376–78). Previous research demonstrates that language is constitutive for the power and legitimacy of IOs (Binder and Heupel 2015; Hurd 2007). Scholars also stress that resolution language is characterized by features such as repetition (Werner 2017) or vagueness (Scotto di Carlo 2013).

A key component of resolution language is the attribution of responsibility (Gifkins 2016). The UNSC uses responsibility attributions to clarify which actors are responsible for carrying out a certain task (e.g., peacekeeping) but also for attributions of who should be held accountable for crimes against humanity and violations of international law. They also reveal the UNSC's collective understanding of responsibility and the UNSC's self-attributed role in the global politics of responsibility.

UNSC resolutions therefore have direct connections to several key debates in International Relations (IR) that highlight the paramount importance of responsibility in IR and the central role of the UNSC in it, including questions of accountability and legitimacy in world politics (Beardsworth 2015; Hansen-Magnusson and Vetterlein 2020), special responsibilities of powerful states (Bukovansky et al. 2012), orchestration and delegation of responsibilities in IOs (Abbott et al. 2015; Hawkins et al. 2006), and the emergence of the concept of responsibility to protect (R2P) (Bellamy 2013; Ralph and Gifkins 2017).

Despite the importance of UNSC resolutions and the responsibility attributions they entail, our knowledge on the language of UNSC resolutions is limited in two important ways. First, we do not know *how* the UNSC attributes responsibility in its resolutions: has the way in

which the Council assigns responsibility—i.e. the precise wording—changed over time? Who are the targets of responsibility attribution in UNSC resolutions? Second, we lack a way to measure responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions. Put differently, we are missing a data basis and a way of empirically capturing responsibility attributions in resolutions. Because of these descriptive gaps, scholars stand on shaky grounds if they seek generalizable analytical explanations for patterns in the UNSC's use of responsibility attribution (Gerring 2012).

In this research note, we attempt to close that gap by making three contributions. First, we introduce the “Language of the UN Security Council” dataset, covering the full text of all UNSC resolutions between 1946 and 2020. In addition to providing a machine-readable corpus of all UNSC resolutions, we enrich the dataset with important metadata, such as member states’ voting records for each resolution (Dreher et al. 2022), information on whether the resolution was passed under Chapter VII, whether it made reference to the R2P and original, handcoded information on the targets of responsibility attributions in all resolutions. Thus, the dataset expands on existing datasets on the UNSC, especially those who cover UNSC resolution texts (see Appendix A1 for a comparison to existing datasets and the types of metadata included). The dataset will allow researchers to ask new and important questions, using the full body of decision texts of the UNSC. This adds to existing research that uses quantitative methods to analyze UNSC meeting records (Schönfeld et al. 2019), resolution text (D’Acquisto 2017; Hanania 2020; Hauenstein and Joshi 2020; Scherzinger 2022), and General Assembly text output (Baturu, Dasandi, and Mikhaylov 2017; Binder and Heupel 2015), but that has so far not focused on the substantive question of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions. It also adds a quantitative perspective to literature on responsibility attribution that studies the UNSC primarily through qualitative case studies (Gifkins 2016; Murphy 2021; Niemann 2019).

Second, we use this data to systematically measure and describe patterns of responsibility attribution in UNSC resolutions over time. Building on debates on the meaning of responsibility in IR, law, and philosophy, we develop a set of terms that reflect different ways of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions. We then trace the usage of these terms over time. Our main finding is that, over time, responsibility attribution in UNSC resolutions has become more prevalent, especially after the end of the Cold War. The rise of responsibility language in UNSC resolutions is visible across different terms, in particularly “accountability”, “commitment”, and “responsibility.” We deem this an indicator for the

existence of actual and sustainable changes of the role of the UNSC and its mandate since 1990. This finding advances ongoing debates how IOs carry out their moral agency (Erskine 2003; Hoover 2012), whether the UN succeeds in its responsibility to prevent mass atrocities (Bellamy 2013; Welsh 2021) and on the implications of the changing UNSC agenda since 1990 (Allen and Yuen 2020; Binder and Golub 2020).

Third, we offer extensions to this baseline description of responsibility attribution, highlighting the ways in which our data and findings inform current debates in IR and the study of decision-making in the UNSC.

In a first step, we explore variation in the targets of responsibility attribution by the UNSC. We identify and handcode the targets of over 2,900 responsibility attributions in our dataset. Our main finding is that the UNSC has dramatically increased responsibility attributions to two entities after the Cold War: individuals and states. The Council is much less active in attributing responsibility to other international organizations (IOs) or non-state actors and only moderately so in attributing responsibility to itself or other members of the UN system, including peacekeeping operations. While UNSC decision-making nowadays addresses a broader and more diverse set of actors, UN member states remain central. This finding provides empirical evidence from one crucial case for debates about the authority and autonomy of IOs (Abbott et al. 2015; Heupel, Hirschmann, and Zürn 2018). It demonstrates both the ability of IOs to expand their reach in a changing global landscape and the limitations thereof due to the still often intergovernmental quality of global governance. Moreover, our research contributes to debates about the role of the UNSC for the legalization and judicialization of world politics (Alter, Hefner-Burton, and Helfer 2019; Johnstone 2011). We highlight that aside from establishing international criminal tribunals, the UNSC also contributed to identifying individuals as subject of international law already in the early 1990s.

In a second step, we investigate the relationship between the programmatic shift towards the adoption of the R2P and the change in responsibility attributions in the UNSC over time. We find that there is little evidence that the UN World Summit in 2005, where the principle of the R2P was formally adopted, is a key driver for responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions over time. Instead, we show that the World Summit was part of a trend towards normative or moral language in the UN that was already apparent in the UNSC before 2005. What we do find, however, is a sharp increase in “accountability” attributions after the World Summit. These findings show how UNSC resolutions reflect a more fundamental normative shift

towards human rights protection apparent in UNSC action, which goes beyond the specific formalization of the R2P (Hanania 2020). Patterns over time identified by our data also shed light on debates about the nascent state of R2P as an international norm (Crossley 2018; Gifkins 2016; Jacob 2018).

Resolution-making in the UN Security Council

Resolutions are the UNSC's primary instrument to communicate its decisions (Sievers and Daws 2014, 376). An extensive body of research has studied how the UNSC makes these decisions. Research on the delegation of responsibilities by UN member states identifies national interests and power asymmetries among UNSC members, especially the structural inequalities between permanent (P5) and elected (E10) members, as primary drivers (Thompson 2006; Voeten 2005). Others emphasize the role of the UNSC as a forum for deliberation, socialization, and processes of collective legitimation (Hurd 2007; Johnstone 2011). According to this research, UN member states play an important role by promoting and co-sponsoring draft resolutions. Staff from the UN bureaucracy and external experts act as knowledge brokers in these negotiations. Scholars of the UNSC agree that resolutions are the outcome of complex negotiation processes. Penholdership, the practice of having one UNSC member – often France, the United Kingdom, or the US – drafting the resolution text, plays a key role in the making of UNSC resolutions and demonstrates how enduring conflicts shape UNSC decision-making (Ralph and Gifkins 2017).

Our approach focuses on resolutions as the formal outcome of UNSC decision-making. Previous research has used UNSC meeting records for studying how frictions among UNSC members affect decision-making processes (Allen and Yuen 2020; Badache, Hellmüller, and Salaymeh 2022). In contrast, we zoom in on the resolution text itself. Resolutions are a remarkable type of text as they represent the corporate outcome of contentious internal negotiation processes among UNSC members. Once adopted, resolutions are published on behalf of the entire UNSC, including those members that voted against their adoption and irrespective of the contentious negotiation processes that led to the adoption. While the negotiation processes, as well as their adoption by vote – and subsequently also their implementation in actual peace processes (Hauenstein and Joshi 2020) – are driven by competition among UNSC members, published resolution text represents the UNSC's view on an issue as a unitary actor.

The meaning of resolution language can be subject of diverging interpretations. Vague language is used strategically to obtain consensus among UNSC members and represents their diverging interest, especially when the P5 disagree (Scherzinger 2022; Scotto di Carlo 2013). At the same time, when the interests of members align, resolutions tend to contain severe and strong wordings for condemnations, which are more likely to have a deterrent effect on the targeted actors (Benson and Tucker 2022; Hauenstein and Joshi 2020). As Werner (2017) discusses, the UNSC also deliberately uses repetitive language to demonstrate coherence across cases. Resolutions therefore provide a rare opportunity to study the UNSC as corporate actor and how it attributes responsibility to other actors within the formalized institutional framework of the UN.¹

The UN Security Council Resolution Corpus, 1946-2020

We rely on quantitative text analysis and explore the frequency and relevance of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions. We compiled a new dataset that covers all resolutions issued between January 1946 and December 2020, a total of 2,503 documents.²

Responsibility refers to situations that are shaped by the expectation that someone should or can act to respond to a condition of harm, crisis, or care (Erskine 2003, 7; Hoover 2012, 238; Miller 2001, 453). Since this expectation constitutes a relationship between bearers of responsibility as moral agents and addressees as subjects of their responsibility, attributions (including claims of self-attribution) are constitutive for any given case of responsibility (Hoover 2012, 238; Peltonen 2013, 31). Our quantitative approach does not provide a substantive definition of what responsibility is or should be. Instead, we identify specific terms that represent responsibility attributions, which we can trace in the text corpus. This approach is based on the fact that existing research uses an array of different terms for analyzing the complex processes constituting a responsibility relationship (Miller 2001, 454). To ensure that we capture responsibility attributions as broadly as possible, we include terms such as accountability, commitment, duty, and obligation in addition to “responsibility” as the most literal expression. Our approach deliberately avoids a substantial qualification of the different terms used for attributing responsibility. Instead, it allows to study patterns of the

¹ We provide an overview of the formal resolution adoption process in the UNSC in Appendix A2.

² We downloaded resolutions from the UN document server, and then converted them from pdf into txt-files. Resolutions without text readable PDFs were scraped from refworld.org and then converted from html into txt-files. For the remaining missing resolutions, we used optical character recognition to convert them into txt-files.

usage of those terms. This is a first, necessary step to inform future research that could focus on their respective qualities.

Table 1 presents the findings of a thorough literature review on responsibility and moral agency for identifying the variety of terms used for explicating responsibility attributions and the rationale why we included them into our set of key terms. All identified terms were then cross-referenced with the UNSC resolution corpus to make sure they were, in fact, used in the UNSC.

To structure the data for the quantitative analysis, we apply standard text-mining procedures (Wilkerson and Casas 2017). First, we convert all uppercase into lowercase letters. Thereby, we ensure that for instance “Responsibility” and “responsibility” are considered as the same words. Second, we delete frequent English stopwords (e.g., the, it, and), and remove interpunctuation, spaces and numbers. Third, we apply stemming, a procedure developed in computational linguistics to reduce related terms to a single word-stem (e.g., the terms argue, argument and arguing are reduced to the word-stem *argu*). We illustrate our procedure in greater detail for resolution S/RES/1000 (1995) on the peacekeeping mission in Cyprus in the Appendix A3. We compile a document-term-matrix (DTM) from the individual documents after processing. The DTM represents the corpus as a data frame, with resolutions as rows and stemmed words as columns (variables). Each cell in the data frame contains the frequency each term is occurring in each resolution. Moreover, the DTM contains the year when a resolution was issued and its length (i.e., word count) as additional variables, as well as the metadata (see Appendix A1.2).

Table 1: Terms of responsibility attribution

Term	Rationale for inclusion	Search words in resolution corpus	References in previous research	UNSC text example (resolution number)
Accountability	Implies that responsibility originates from relations of belonging in a community that holds the capacity to evaluate and sanction behavior by the bearer of responsibility retrospectively.	Accountable, accountability	Vetterlein 2018, 545; Young 2006, 120	“accountability for those perpetrating sexual violence in conflict” (S/RES/2467)
Commitment	Refers to acts of connecting one’s responsibility to the assumptions and expectations of others.	Commitment, commit	Dobson 2008, 42; Young 2006, 106	“stressing the need for the parties to honour the commitments they made [...] to advance the peace process” (S/RES/1341)
Duty	Indicates that a responsibility for someone or something is translated into specific rules of action that the speaker demands the addressee to implement.	Duty	Peltonen 2013, 31–32; Young 2006, 125	“[...] strongly condemns the attacks [...] against UNPROFOR in the conduct of its duty of protecting civilians” (S/RES/802)
Liability	Defines a responsibility, often in a legal understanding that can be clearly or even causally linked to particular actions or practices by the bearer of this responsibility.	Liable, liability	Kutz 2004, 574; Peltonen 2013, 30; Young 2006, 116	“decides [...] that the Government of Iraq shall be liable for the full costs of carrying out the tasks [...]” (S/RES/699)
Obligation	Expresses the inherent sense of responsibility, a bearer of this responsibility has or is expected to have by third parties.	Obligation, obliged	Gunder and Hillier 2007, 64–65; Hoover 2012, 235	“Recalls the obligation on both parties to fully respect the terms of the 1974 Disengagement of Forces Agreement” (S/RES/2028)
Responsibility	Refers to a relationship that is built around the expectation or claim that some has to act in a particular situation.	Responsibility, responsible	Erskine 2003, 7; Hansen-Magnusson 2019, 139	“[...] stresses that occupying forces should be held responsible for human rights violations in the territory under their control [...]” (S/RES/ 1341)

Figure 1 describes the number and length of resolutions that were adopted by the UNSC over time. The left panel in figure 1 shows that after the end of the Cold War substantially more resolutions were adopted by the UNSC. Whereas during the Cold War, the UNSC adopted on average 14.7 resolutions per year, when the US and the USSR ended their mutual blockade after the end of the Cold War, the output was on average 62 resolutions per year. The right panel in Figure 1 highlights that this trend can also be observed regarding the length of resolutions in words. To ensure comparability, we considered only the number of words in the resolution and excluded all annexes. However, the resolution length increases less drastically after the end of the Cold War, taking up speed only after 2006.

Figure 1: Frequency and lengths of resolutions per year

[Figure 1 here]

The evolution of responsibility language in the UN Security Council

We begin our analysis by investigating the overall occurrence of the six terms attributing responsibility within the full corpus of UNSC resolutions, 1946-2020. The results are described in Figure 2. The left panel displays the raw count of each term in the entire corpus. The plot shows that the terms “accountability”, “commitment”, and “responsibility” are applied most frequently by the UNSC in absolute terms. “Liability” and “duty” almost never occur, while “obligation” is used more often, but still substantially less frequently than the first three terms. The right panel displays the share of all resolutions which mention a term at least once. Again, accountability, commitment, and responsibility appear most frequently. However, in contrast to the raw count, commitment appears in a higher number of resolutions at least once.

Figure 2: Frequency of responsibility-related terms in the UNSC resolution corpus

[Figure 2 here]

This figure masks variation over time—yet, accurately measuring the prevalence of terms over time presents two challenges. First, we need an empirical measure that reflects how

frequently a term occurs within a document. More frequent occurrences in a document should reflect a more relevant term. Second, a measure of term relevance needs to capture in how many resolutions in a year a term occurs. A term that occurs in many resolutions at least once is more relevant than a term that only occurs once, or not at all.

Addressing these challenges, we compute a measure of term relevance that is the product of two factors: (1) the share of the (logged) number of occurrences of a term in relation to the (logged) resolution length, averaged for all documents in a year, and (2) the share of all documents in a year in which the term occurs at least once.³ Intuitively, the first factor captures the (average) frequency of a term *within* resolutions, while the second factor captures the frequency of the term *across* resolutions in a year. This product has the useful property that it flexibly accounts for resolution length and resolution frequency, which, as we show in Figure 1, have both increased over time. Figure 3 plots this measure of term relevance for each responsibility term over time.

Figure 3: Trends of responsibility-related terms in the UNSC resolution corpus

[Figure 3 here]

The figure shows three empirical trends. First, prior to 1990, the UNSC does not employ almost any responsibility-related language at all. Second, we observe a marked jump in the use of the three most important terms identified above, “accountability”, “commitment” and “responsibility” after the end of the UNSC’s Cold War gridlock. Among those terms, “commitment” sees the most visible direct jump after 1990, reflecting the many peace efforts in which the UNSC was involved in during that time. The term “responsibility” also displays a visible increase after 1990.⁴ “Accountability” picks up speed more slowly, gaining traction only after 2000, but ending up at a relative share of resolution text as the other two terms. Third, the three terms identified as less important in Figure 2—duty, liability, obligation—do not display any important trends over time in Figure 3, either. While we do observe more use of the term “obligation” after 1990, this increase is much lower than the use of the three terms

³ The log transformation in the first part of the product accounts for the fact that the increase of 0 to 1 occurrences of a term should be given more weight than, for instance, an increase of 10 to 11 term uses.

⁴ We investigated the small spike in the term relevance of “responsibility” in the 1970s to probe the face validity of our measure of term relevance. We provide more details on this validity check in Appendix A1.3.

identified above. Finally, we do not identify any meaningful temporal variation for the usage of the term “liability” in UNSC resolutions.

The central finding of this analysis is that responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions have increased over time, but only for the terms “responsibility,” “accountability,” and “commitment.” This result paints a picture of a UNSC that increasingly uses resolutions to allocate responsibility, especially since the end of the Cold War. To highlight the usefulness of our dataset for future research and to show the implications of this finding, we demonstrate below how our data can provide fresh perspectives for selected important debates in IR.

Who is targeted by responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions?

The first issue our data helps to illuminate is the question who is targeted by the responsibility attributions we document in Figure 3. Identifying the targets of responsibility attributions is relevant for a diverse set of debates in IR:

One set of debates centers on the role of non-state actors as global governance actors. Debates about new modes of governance, such as polycentric or networked governance (Kim 2020), orchestration (Abbott et al. 2015), or delegation and agency (Hawkins et al. 2006) problematize the dominant role of state actors in an international system that becomes increasingly transnational. Existing research highlights the growing importance of non-state actors as policy experts and stakeholder representatives as well as the rise of private authority in such governance arrangements (Jönsson and Tallberg 2010). Studying who is targeted by UNSC responsibility attributions helps to show if and to what degree tasks are delegated to a broader set of actors in the global governance of international peace and security, such as other international organizations or UN bodies.

Another set of debates focuses on the emergence of individuals as actors of global governance (Heupel, Hirschmann, and Zürn 2018). Especially discussions about the legalization of world politics (Abbott et al. 2000; Johnstone 2011), the rise of international criminal justice and judicialization (Alter, Hafner-Burton, and Helfer 2019), and the politics of targeted sanctions (Giumelli 2015) illustrate the emergence of individuals as actors with rights and responsibilities in the international system. The UNSC was crucial for the establishment of the International Criminal Court and the preceding ad-hoc tribunals (Arbour 2014), which were important drivers of the rise of individuals as actors of global governance. Studying responsibility attributions therefore helps to better understand how the UNSC contributed to

the recognition of individuals as relevant actors in international law even though it is a non-adjudicatory political body.

We approach these issues by categorizing all actors addressed by the responsibility attribution. Focusing on the term “responsibility”, we coded the targets of 3073 attributions occurring in 1047 resolutions. We identified nine different types of actors addressed by the UNSC in its resolutions. (1) states, (2) UNSC self-attribution, (3) individual persons, (4) people (referring to a country’s population), (5) other UN organizations, incl. peacekeeping missions, (6) other international organizations, incl. regional organizations, (7) non-state actors, (8) the international community, and (9) any other, general responsibility attribution without a clear target.⁵

The frequency of attributions to these types of actors reflects how UNSC targeting of actors has changed over time, providing empirical evidence for shifting modes of global governance. Namely, we should observe an increase in the relevance of the responsibility attributions towards non-state actors (e.g., to rebel groups, civil society organizations, transnational social movements, multinational corporations) or other international organizations and of individuals. To investigate these implications empirically, we plot the percentage of each attribution target before and after the end of the Cold War in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Targets of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions

[Figure 4 here]

The most substantial trends visible in the data are an increase in the relevance of responsibility attributions towards member states and individual persons. Member states were already relevant targets of attributions before the end of the Cold War. After 1990, however, we see an even stronger increase with member states being targeted the most with responsibility attributions compared to other targets. We observe a similar pattern for individual persons as targets of responsibility attributions, which also increase substantially in relevance after 1990.

⁵ See Appendix A4.1 for details on the coding procedure.

In addition to these trends, we also see that self-attributions and attributions to other UN bodies appear to be more relevant after the end of the Cold War.⁶ These trends stand in contrast to less pronounced developments: responsibility attributions to the international community, to people in general, i.e., the population of specific countries, to non-state actors and to other international organizations, do not seem to be very relevant.

We draw two main conclusions from these findings. First, UNSC decision-making was and still is heavily focused on member-states, questioning whether there is clear evidence for an increase of new modes of governance by the UNSC. Even after 1990, when a substantial increase of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions occurred, only few attributions target other international organizations and non-state actors. Instead, our data shows that predominantly states, and to a lesser extent the UNSC itself and other UN bodies, are main addressees of responsibility attributions. While there is a rather stable pattern in the UNSC's responsibility attribution to itself or other UN bodies, the stark increase in responsibility attributions to member states is a reminder of the UNSC's state-centered composition.

This is not to say that the UNSC does not function as an orchestrator or delegator at all. It played an important role in orchestrating business actors in conflict minerals (Haufler 2015), for instance. Also, the Council is more engaged in non-hierarchical modes of governance when it comes to implementation, as has been shown in the field of counterterrorism and non-proliferation (Kienzle 2019). But relative to other attribution targets, especially states and individuals, the number of attributions to “non-traditional” actors is lower.

A second conclusion is that the UNSC has indeed increased responsibility attributions to individuals. This is a remarkable development given the limited role of individuals within the intergovernmental framework of the UN system. Many of these attributions occur in the context of the UNSC's engagement with the international tribunals in Rwanda and Former Yugoslavia: in additional analyses, we find that more than 99% of these attribution to persons can be considered an attribution of responsibility for individual misconduct, such as violations of the UN charter or violations of international criminal law. In contrast, most attributions (~98%) that target states and all the attributions that target other, non-UN organizations assign general responsibility for the implementation of tasks and obligations as specified in a resolution (e.g., peacekeeping mission responsibilities, or general responsibility of states to protect their population).⁷ This pattern of individual responsibility attribution demonstrates

⁶ Most of the time “other UN bodies” refers to UN peacekeeping missions.

⁷ See Appendix A4.2 for details regarding this analysis.

the UNSC's important role for the establishment and promotion of international criminal law since the 1990s.

The Responsibility to Protect in UNSC resolutions

A key research program that our data speak to is the debate on the status of R2P as an international norm (Orford 2011; Thakur and Weiss 2009). The principle of R2P asserts the key responsibility of a state to protect its population from mass atrocities such as genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. It furthermore defines that when a state is unable or unwilling to fulfil this responsibility, the responsibility to protect those populations falls to the international community (Thakur and Weiss 2009, 24).

The question whether and when the R2P has achieved the status of an international norm is important for policymakers and scholars, especially in relationship to the UNSC: The R2P literature credits the UNSC as a central forum in which R2P norm development has historically taken place (Peters 2011; Welsh 2021). At the same time, UNSC resolution text is understood as a potential cause of contestation about meaning and status of R2P as an international norm, raising questions about how the R2P is expressed in UNSC language text (Jacob 2018, 396).

Our data help us to inform both elements of this debate. First, we can use our data to trace the development of responsibility language over *time*, particularly in relationship to key events in the UN history that served as focal points for the evolution of R2P. Second, since our data capture (almost) the entire language of responsibility in resolution texts, we can study different *words* with which the UNSC refers to responsibility in addition to the term “responsibility” alone.

The textual nuance and long time-series in our data allow us to study norm development beyond a narrow, literal reference to the R2P. The UNSC refers to R2P in its resolution text by attributing a specific actor with it, e.g. “it is the primary responsibility of ... to protect its people.” In contrast, our data allow for a much broader, general perspective of responsibility attributions in the UNSC. As a result, our data offer an important complement to more in-depth, qualitative analyses of the R2P, as in Gifkins (2016).

To investigate temporal development and linguistic diversity of the R2P we study whether the 2005 World Summit—a key reform event in UN history—has been a critical driver of the

general responsibility proliferation described above. During the 2005 Summit the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/60/1, which included the by now well-known paragraphs 138 and 139 that for the first time cast the principle of the international responsibility to protect people from grave human rights violations into a widely accepted UN document.

We therefore analyze the annual relevance of responsibility attribution over time for the terms “accountability,” “commitment” and “responsibility” before and after the introduction of the R2P at the World Summit. The annual term relevance reflects the importance of each of these terms over time and thus allows us to compare whether and to what extent the World Summit was a driver of the types of responsibility language in UNSC resolutions we found to be relevant in Figure 3 above. Instead of focusing exclusively on the specific wording of R2P as defined in the Summit outcome document, we provide a broader account of responsibility language in relation to an event that should be a key driver of norm development. We acknowledge that this type of analysis loses somewhat of the more fine-grained meaning of how the UNSC typically evokes the R2P, for instance that the UNSC often evokes the responsibility of governments/states rather than the international community (Gifkins 2016). But what we gain from this analysis is the ability to embed the development of R2P-related language on a larger time frame and for a wider set of terms.

Figure 5: Responsibility language in resolutions and the 2005 UN World Summit

[Figure 5 here]

Figure 5 presents the results of this analysis. The plot replicates the results from Figure 3 but highlights the temporal trend with different linear slopes (thick, straight lines) before and after 2005. Figure 5 indicates that the introduction of the R2P was a clear driver of responsibility attribution concerning the term “accountability.” While the term “accountability” had almost no relevance before the introduction of the R2P at the 2005 World Summit, we observe a steep upward slope of the trendline directly after its introduction in the left panel of Figure 5.

At the same time, the results are less clear cut regarding the other two terms, “commitment”, and “responsibility”. The plot suggest that it is unlikely that the R2P has had a lasting effect on the development of term-relevance of “commitment” in UNSC resolutions (center panel of Figure 5), since the time trend seems to be unrelated to the introduction of the R2P in 2005. Instead, other events and processes during the 1990s are more likely better explanations for

the substantial upward trend in the relevance of “commitment”. Regarding the effect of the R2P on the relevance of the term “responsibility” our results are inconclusive (right panel of Figure 5). While we can see another upward shift in the trend occurring around the introduction of the R2P in 2005, the time trend indicates that a substantial increase in relevance already occurred in the 1990s. The relevance of responsibility attributions already increased in the 1990 due to the growing number of peacekeeping operations during that time, which required frequent responsibility attributions by the UNSC to the peace operations themselves, but also to the parties of the conflict (e.g. S/RES/954 extending the mandate of UNOSOM II in Somalia in 1994).

These results suggest that the UNSC has contributed to the diffusion of R2P as an international norm, but more broadly than references to the World Summit’s wording indicate. Our findings underline that the broader idea to reinterpret state sovereignty as a matter of the protection of people has made it into UNSC practice. Like “agreed language” (Gifkins 2016), it seems that the outcome of programmatic initiatives such as the World Summit eventually diffuses into UNSC language. The temporal trends of terms such as “commitment” and “responsibility” however demonstrate that the World Summit seemed to have served more as catalyst rather than sole cause of changing responsibility language in the UNSC.

The Council’s role in norm diffusion regarding the R2P is especially visible by increased references to accountability. While not a key part of the World Summit’s definition, the idea of accountability has direct linkages to the concept. The UNSC can refer cases to the ICC, but also may hold individuals that engage in mass atrocities accountable by sanctions and other measures (Hehir and Lang 2015). This interpretation is consistent with the finding above that the UNSC has increasingly targeted individuals (and specifically individuals’ misconduct) in its resolutions. Our findings therefore indicate that, beyond a narrow understanding of R2P in terms of the 2005 World Summit, the UNSC plays a key role in promoting a broader idea of mass atrocity responses by the international community through the concept of accountability. These findings are intriguing given that the R2P still faces significant reservation, especially among P5 member and countries from the Global South (Jacob 2018; Welsh 2013).

Conclusion

Responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions represent a key mode of governance through which the UNSC assigns tasks, asserts its international authority, and sets and solidifies

international norms. In this research note, we provide the first systematic, quantitative description of responsibility attributions in UNSC resolutions over time and across different terms.

Our key finding is that the UNSC has increasingly used responsibility attributions after the end of the Cold War. It particularly uses terms such as “responsibility,” “accountability,” and “commitment” to assign responsibility. Other plausible terms, such as liability, obligation, or duty, find much less use in the UNSC resolution corpus.

We show how our findings and data can inform two sets of important debates in IR. First, we demonstrate that we observe few responsibility attributions to non-state actors, other IOs, or UN organizations—targets of responsibility attributions associated with new modes of international governance, such as polycentric governance and orchestration. Instead, the UNSC primarily targets individuals and states with responsibility attributions. This finding is more in line with accounts that highlight the increased importance of individuals as actors and the continued importance of states in international relations. Second, we use our data to show how the UNSC advanced the diffusion of R2P after the 2005 World Summit. We demonstrate links between the World Summit and a sharp increase in the usage of the term “accountability” in UNSC resolutions. To a lesser extent the event also drives usage of the term “responsibility”. This result indicates that the R2P is reflected in a broader sense in the entire corpus of UNSC resolutions.

These findings, together with our dataset, provide an exciting starting point for future research on the language of UNSC resolutions. A first relevant avenue is to use our dataset to automate the recognition of targets of responsibility attribution, both in future UNSC resolutions and other UN texts, such as General Assembly resolutions or UNSC speeches. Researchers can use our hand-coded entities of responsibility targets (which we make available together with the replication data) to train machine learning algorithms to detect targets of responsibility attributions in previously unseen texts. The metadata in our dataset on Chapter VII resolutions, R2P resolutions, and voting records, member state composition (see Appendix A1.2 for a list of available metadata variables), will enable researchers to not only train these models on resolution language alone, but also incorporate important resolution context variables as predictors.

Second, future research can use our dataset to advance theories about the role of UN member states in the UNSC. We have deliberately limited our descriptive analysis to the main output document of the UNSC, its resolutions. But the UNSC is not a unitary actor. The 15 member

states that make up the UNSC are the main actors responsible for negotiating resolution contents and authoring its text. Diversifying penholding, the practice of drafting resolution text, has become a key issue of E10 members. A key question our data might be able to help answer is therefore how the changing composition of the UNSC, which due to its formal structures essentially refers to the rotation of E10 members, shapes the eventual resolution language, including responsibility attributions. To facilitate this research, we have added country identifiers as well as member states' voting records to our dataset, enabling researchers to link relevant country-level datasets to our data, such as the Varieties of Democracy dataset (Coppedge et al. 2022) or the AidData project (Goodman et al. 2019).

A third possibility is to combine our data with qualitative research on the meaning of UNSC responsibility attributions. In-depth qualitative research through close observation of and interviews with those involved in drafting, discussing, and passing UNSC resolutions would allow researchers to study many more detailed follow-up questions. These include the contextual meaning of responsibility language, the vagueness and ambiguity of resolution text, or how resolutions on specific actors or situation reflect certain discourses or frames. One fruitful field of research to which our data could contribute are debates about the moral vs. the legal quality of responsibility, which raise interesting questions regarding the self-perception of the UNSC as moral agent. Our dataset allows researchers to draw representative samples of resolutions, advancing the methodological quality in studying these questions.

Finally, our data can provide insights into broader programmatic developments of the UNSC agenda. We currently lack a solid understanding of how and when topics emerge on the UNSC's agenda (Allen and Yuen 2020, 659). Researchers could use our data to study how, when, and why new policy issues, such as climate change or global health security, appear in UNSC resolution text. Moreover, it could be used for studying if specific programmatic developments such as the Sustainable Development Goals or the Women, Peace, and Security agenda have an impact on UNSC agenda setting.

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