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Abstract

Why does the UN Security Council frequently convene to some mass atrocities while others are left off the docket entirely? Since October 2023, Gaza has occupied a near-constant place on the Council's formal agenda, despite deep and persistent division among members. Fifteen years earlier, a comparably severe endgame to Sri Lanka's civil war never reached the agenda at all. Existing accounts of UNSC agenda-setting, built around the Council's ordinary docket, expect preference divergence to suppress engagement: where members disagree, resolutions are unlikely, and issues that cannot produce one are not worth the Council's limited plenary time. This logic sits uneasily with cases like Gaza, where frequent engagement, as well as frequent vetoes, is present. This paper argues that mass atrocity (MA) events call for a different logic, for two reasons. First, MA events clear a normative severity threshold by construction, making non-response a visible and reputationally costly failure rather than a neutral scheduling choice. Second, drawing on the Council's function as a collective legitimizer, I relax the assumption that resolution passage is the meaningful marker of engagement. A formal meeting is itself a consequential act of collective judgment, independent of its legislative output. Once passage is set aside as the object members are presumed to pursue, preference variance may no longer act as a brake on agenda-setting. I argue instead that, for MA events, variance operates as a gas pedal: division raises the reputational stakes of silence and gives Council members more reason to convene, and to convene repeatedly, even without consensus. I test these expectations using an original dataset of UNSC responses to 24 mass atrocity events with violence onset between 1989 and 2022.