

The UN Security Council: STRESS-TESTED

by David M. Malone

After the United Nations' (UN) 75th anniversary, it is easy today to forget that this most central and far-reaching of all multilateral organizations was born in very high hopes of its permanent relevancy in maintaining international peace and security. But by baking in a veto for each of the five victorious World War II powers—or deemed as such by the 1945 governments in Washington and London, the godparents of the UN Security Council—the seeds of its frequent spells of semiparalysis were sown, spells which have been intensifying for at least the past four years. Indeed, the council arguably operated at near-peak effectiveness only during the years between 1987 – 1994, when the Cold War was ending and then briefly, as of 1990, appeared to have ended. However, misjudgments in Washington over the extent to which Moscow's alignment with the thinking of Western capitals could be taken for granted—an attitude bitterly resented at the time by the new Russian Federation—ended that brief spell.

Token gestures were made to Mikhail Gorbachev's successor, Boris Yeltsin, for Russia's inclusion in the G-8.



By the time Yeltsin had flamed out, however, his successor, Vladimir Putin—a brilliant but revanchist throwback of the KGB's centrality to power—had noticed how little Western powers took into account enduring Russian interests. As such, Putin soon apprised them of his country's continuing capacity to serve as a disruptor of considerable military potency. Additionally, the rise of China, initially under the soothing, non-confrontational guidance of leaders requiring access to global markets and displaying an ability to bide their time, has now succeeded to the extent that Beijing is clearly the world's second power, vying to become its greatest. Currently, Russia is in a distant third position, albeit still commanding considerable nuisance capability, as it has displayed repeatedly, most recently in Ukraine and Syria.

History is unlikely to look kindly on the absent-minded, if at times diplomatically creative, U.S. administrations of George H.W. Bush—however skilled Secretary of State James Baker was as a brilliant tactician—or the cumulatively feckless, if initially feel-good, administration of Bill Clinton. The results of their strategic errors

during the early 1990s are on sad display today at the UN. The deep and enduring rift that George W. Bush's 2003 decision to invade Iraq created within the Security Council, a decision that overrode the council's refusal to approve the policy, definitively ended the era of relatively sustained multilateral cooperation during the 1990s. Since then, the council has been characterized more by fracture and paralysis than by action. This includes during the Obama years, when a brief moment of unity around the Arab Spring rapidly descended into the deeply entrenched positions we experience today, with catastrophic consequences in countries such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya.

Consider the following exchange in the council on December 23, 2020, initiated by Christoph Heusgen, the talented and energetic German representative on the body. In reference to two foreign detainees in China taken hostage over a political quarrel, Heusgen—who was nearing the conclusion of two-year mandate as an elected member—implored, "Let me end my tenure on the Security Council by appealing to my Chinese colleagues to ask Beijing for the release of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. Christmas is the right moment for such a gesture." China's representative retorted, "Out of the bottom of my heart: good riddance ... I am hoping that the Council with your absence in 2021 will be in a better position to fulfill the responsibilities ... for maintaining international peace and security." Russia's representative, Deputy UN Ambassador Dmitry Polyanskiy, indisposed by earlier references to the poisoning of Russian opposition politician Alexei Navalny, commented, "I hope that after January 1 Christoph's symptoms will improve." These petty and personalized exchanges illustrate the low ebb at which the council finds itself today, on par with the frozen 1950s and 1960s in the body.

The pathetic dynamics at play result not only from the Trump administration's outright anti-multilateralist stance in Washington, D.C., but also from Vladimir Putin's regime's deep cynicism and hard power stance in Moscow, and the Chinese government's growing predilection for *Wolf Warrior* diplomacy. The two other Permanent Members, the UK (somewhat distracted by its bumpy exit from the European Union, although well-positioned to capitalize on its chairmanship of the important global climate change conference in Glasgow, November 2021) and France (with increasingly fractious domestic politics often distracting from occasionally kinetic foreign policy initiatives, while diplomatically creative and dynamic) no longer have the geostrategic weight on their own to significantly affect dynamics within the council. Joining together with other like-minded countries may be one way to build clout behind their often very good ideas. For example, picking up on UN Secretary-General António

Guterres's call for a global ceasefire shortly after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the UK and France have repeatedly demonstrated themselves to be responsible international actors. Furthermore, their significant regional influence, for example in Africa, and deft diplomacy might help them bridge the disheartening divide in the council under President Trump between the United States and both China and Russia.

For those of us complacent enough to have believed in bygone decades that the post-Cold War era would be one of unmodulated international comity, recent years have been a rude awakening. They require more creative, less confrontational interaction within the council among

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the P-5. Can the council get its mojo back? A more predictable, responsible U.S. administration will help. It may be able to persuade both Beijing and Moscow to tone down the ideological, hostile rhetoric and some of their more risky geo-strategic initiatives in favor of actions to support a lowering of international tensions. But unyielding policy by both China and Russia suggest that their governments, while perhaps considering goodwill gestures to President Biden, are unlikely to join in any significant effort

to manage international relations more coherently and peacefully.

Thus, the new administration in Washington, albeit with a respected and experienced professional UN Ambassador and an accomplished Secretary of State, will have its work cut out for it on the multilateral level—not least with most of its attention initially focused on domestic matters until the economy stabilizes post-pandemic and until the Democratic Party's hold on both houses of Congress is significantly enhanced, if possible. It is worth noting that the Obama administration, while composed of similarly seasoned, pro-multilateralists akin to those now entering Biden's cabinet, was unable to build unity among the council on the major crises of the time (Syria, Libya, Yemen). Simply replicating Obama-era policy will not work now, given that wider international relations have deteriorated so sharply during the four chaotic years of Mr. Trump's international ventures.

The council has remained most active and, arguably, effective in Africa. In truth, most of its peace operations are, at best, holding the line, one of them dependent on French firepower. However, the Security Council increasingly only makes meaningful decisions related to Africa at the instigation of, or with the consent of, the African Union. The latter would prefer to manage peace operations on its own but lacks the financial resources to do so. This tactical alliance, if not a fully strategic one, between two important multilateral organizations—one near universal and the other regional—is likely the best we can hope for in the immediate future. Indeed, the

sole peace operation in which the UN and African Union have been ostensibly joined in strategic partnership—the hybrid operation in Darfur—is closing down this year.

In the Middle East, apart from its heroic humanitarian operations in Yemen, the UN has never seemed more marginalized, especially on the catastrophic Syria portfolio.⁸¹ Indeed, the Russian Federation and the United States each sought to instrumentalize the UN, at great cost to Syrian lives, without in any way seeking to energize or empower it on this most murderous of current conflicts. This is why each of a long succession of UN envoys for Syria, starting with the much-admired late Secretary-General Kofi Annan, resigned from the office in frustration.

What has the UN done well lately, leaving the council aside, in these remaining lines? First off, its normative decision-making on issues such as the Sustainable Development Goals has been effective, although perhaps over-optimistic. It is nevertheless important to consider that, likewise, the Millennium Development Goals were initially considered wildly unrealistic. However, they and the targets by which they were given operational weight were mostly achieved due to a unique spurt of economic growth in the developing world between the years 2000–2015, with both China and India in the fore, albeit the latter two slowing noticeably by 2015. The UN has also done an exemplary job of leading and coordinating international humanitarian action, even while the need for it has continued to grow near-exponentially due to ever-greater tensions and outright international and intra-national wars, spawning ever-growing numbers of refugees and internally displaced populations by the millions. Funding of these efforts has never been adequate to rising needs, and is likely to be less so in years ahead as some of the donor countries address the domestic implications of the COVID-19 pandemic in their own countries. For this reason, humanitarian programs are increasingly displacing development efforts within industrialized government foreign assistance programs, with unknowable consequences.

Most importantly perhaps, the UN's leadership of the fight against climate change has garnered growing support while attracting very little overt hostility, including within the council. Much of the result, so far, is hortatory with promises of meaningful results only by 2050 or 2060, but there can be little doubt that this train has left the station. This is probably due to the fact that the issue itself is existential for humans and many other current forms of life on earth and that concern about climate change is shared on all continents. The fact that the council regularly considers the links between climate change and conflict (if

taking little action to date) indicates that this door is ajar and could, through creative and inclusive initiatives, be pushed further open.

Should we despair? No. Generating shared global action has always been difficult, requiring strong leadership. Fortunately, the UN contributes to that significantly when it elects a strong and capable secretary-general, which it did in selecting Kofi Annan (1996–2006) of Ghana and António Guterres (in 2016) of Portugal, who, in turn, appoint strong colleagues to senior UN leadership positions, such as current Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohamed of Nigeria and her predecessor, Jan Eliasson of Sweden. But member states need to reinvest in the UN, not just financially but, at the core, in terms

of good faith. That simple commodity has been sorely missing in recent years within the UN Security Council among its most powerful members. Its absence could cripple the multilateral enterprise, from which we have all benefited so much, in keeping with Franklin D. Roosevelt's early vision for the United Nations.

Indeed, there are some signs that member states

are realigning with the multilateral system. After four years in which the United States withdrew from major international processes (e.g. the Iran nuclear deal) and openly undermined well-established international institutions like the WTO, the WHO, and the UN's Human Rights Council, it is now doubling down on its multilateral commitments under President Biden, breathing new life into the Paris Climate Accords in particular. More broadly, the General Assembly marked the UN's 75th anniversary last year with a declaration recommitting to multilateralism as the only viable approach to today's most pressing challenges, including sustainable development, climate change, new technologies, and peace and security.⁸² Referred to as the UN's "Common Agenda," this set of commitments offers an opportunity for the secretary-general to chart out an ambitious platform for his (now certain) second term; a platform that must go beyond the kind of incremental changes that marked the 2018 reform process and indeed must identify new ideas, beyond the non-starter of Security Council reform.



UN Millennium Development Goals 2001-2015 / Source UN Media Archive

⁸¹Michelle Nichols, "After 10 years of war Syria still a 'living nightmare,' says U.N. chief", Reuters, December 28, 2020, < <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-un-idUSKBN2B22OI>> (accessed Feb 3, 2021).

⁸²UN General Assembly Resolution 1, September 20, 2020.

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