



Commentary

Published 6 November 2019

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Three Troubling Trends at the UN Security Council

China and the West are increasingly at loggerheads in Turtle Bay. So are European capitals and Washington. The handling of African crises is contentious as well. Amid these frictions, it is the job of UN diplomats to keep channels for quiet communication up and running.

Security Council diplomats have a chance to engage in some self-criticism this week. On Thursday and Friday, representatives of the Council's current members will attend a workshop with their counterparts from the five elected members joining it in 2020 (Estonia, Niger, Tunisia, Vietnam, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines). This event, convened by Finland, is one of two annual opportunities for Council insiders to discuss their collective efforts – the other, a retreat with the Secretary-General, took place in May – and their talks can be quite frank.

According to a detailed summary of last year's workshop, "a participant lamented that there was a prevailing image of the Security Council as an organ that was becoming less effective and less influential over time".

Similar laments are likely to be heard this year. As Crisis Group noted in a late April briefing – published on the eve of the Secretary-General's retreat – the Council stumbled badly in the first months of 2019. Its members "spared bitterly over Venezuela, struggled to sustain the Yemeni peace process, and failed to come

to common positions on events in Sudan and Libya". A good six months later, this diagnosis largely holds. The Council has not discussed Venezuela at all since May (even members that want it to do more think the crisis is too polarising) and found it hard to respond to fresh outbreaks of violence in Yemen. It has done little to stop the ongoing fighting in Libya and – other than agreeing to keep UN peacekeepers in Darfur – made a scant contribution to Sudan's political transition. It has responded indecisively to other challenges, including the Kashmir crisis and Turkey's incursion into Syria.

Many commentators only notice the Council when diplomacy breaks down and one or more permanent members resort to a veto. By this metric, 2019 has not been especially dramatic so far. China and Russia jointly vetoed two Western-backed resolutions – one in February calling for new elections in Venezuela and another in September demanding a ceasefire in north-western Syria – which is roughly in line with the numbers from recent years. But it is a mistake to focus on vetoes as the sole, or even the most telling, indicator of Council dysfunction.

Analysing the UN at close quarters, three subtle but troubling trends are noticeable since April. The first is a gradual but significant souring of relations between China and the Council's Western members. The second is the deepening of divisions between the U.S. and its European

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New U.S. Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft casts a vote during her first UN Security Council meeting at UN headquarters in New York, U.S., 12 September 2019. REUTERS/Mike Segar

allies about the forum’s role in responding to trouble spots such as Syria and the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (DPRK). The third is the growth of disputes over how the Council deals with crises in Africa – which have created divisions both between African and non-African diplomats and also among African officials themselves – which Crisis Group covered in a report in June. As senior diplomats gather for this week’s workshop, it is worth assessing these three trends.

Worsening Western Tensions with China

The potentially most significant of these shifts concerns the West’s relationship with China. While Beijing has been gaining influence across the UN system in recent years, causing concern in U.S. policy circles, China has usually been more cautious in the Security Council than in other multilateral forums. Western members have generally reciprocated by steering clear of friction with the Chinese in all but a handful of matters. Even on a divisive Asian issue such as

the Rohingya crisis in Myanmar, the Europeans and U.S. have refrained from forcing China into vetoing resolutions attacking the government in Naypyidaw, in contrast to their recurrent public fights with Russia over Syria. In our April briefing we characterised Western diplomats’ attitude toward China in the Council as “mutual accommodation”.

This year, however, Western diplomats have edged toward a harder line with China in the Council – and the Chinese have in turn become more assertive. This trend is symptomatic of a broader deterioration in relations between China, on the one hand, and the U.S. and most Europeans, on the other, driven by differences over trade, technological competition and the balance of power in the Asia-Pacific. The Security Council is, at most, tangentially relevant to most of these tensions. But it is a platform for each side to take relatively low-risk potshots at the other’s policies.

The situations in China’s Xinjiang region and Kashmir have been the main points of

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Sino-Western friction in the Council. From early in the year, senior Western diplomats in New York have worried about how to broach the subject of Beijing’s incarceration of one million Uighurs in Xinjiang. In July, the U.S. and Germany raised the issue in a “heated” closed Council session. Shortly afterward, 22 nations – including all the Western European members of the Security Council – signed a letter to the president of the Geneva-based Human Rights Council delineating their concerns. The U.S., having pulled out of the Human Rights Council in 2018, was not a signatory, but it backed a similar declaration at the General Assembly last month. This campaign of criticism through the UN has inevitably riled the Chinese, who mustered 37 supporters to sign a counter-letter to the Human Rights Council endorsing China’s response to “the grave challenges of terrorism and extremism” in Xinjiang.

Talks on Afghanistan have also highlighted Western tensions with China, which threatened to veto a routine resolution renewing the mandate of the long-running UN Assistance Mission (UNAMA) in Kabul this September. The immediate reason was that the text did not include positive language on the regional impact of Beijing’s Belt and Road Initiative. Earlier UNAMA mandates included such language, but the U.S. insisted that it be removed during negotiations in March of this year. While China stepped back from using its veto – accepting a compromise formula praising “connectivity” in Central Asia – many diplomats were surprised that Beijing would engage in such a public spat over a textual issue like this. China showed its assertive side again in the Council in August by demanding a closed meeting on India’s decision to strip Kashmir of statehood and launch a major security operation there. This discussion – the Council’s first on Kashmir since 1971 – set the Chinese, who strongly backed Pakistani criticisms of Indian policy, against both the U.S. and Russia, which staunchly supported New

Delhi. That the meeting took place at all was widely interpreted as a win for Pakistan, but it did India no real harm, as most participants including the Europeans and U.S. signalled opposition to pursuing the topic. Perhaps of more lasting significance was China’s willingness to push for the meeting, signalling that it may be willing to risk more public fights at the UN in the future, in contrast to its previous cautious posture.

Limited diplomatic sparring is hardly unusual in UN diplomacy. But this year’s frictions could well foreshadow more fundamental clashes to come. Some Western diplomats have long nurtured a hope that they can persuade China to establish a closer partnership in the Security Council, and in particular to break with Russia in UN debates on crises like Syria. It now seems possible that growing geopolitical rifts with Beijing could severely complicate relations at the UN in the future, independent of Russia.

Diverging American and European Strategies

If U.S. and European diplomats may be broadly united in their growing suspicion of China, their UN strategies have diverged markedly on other major challenges. In our April briefing, we warned that “the Western group is splintering in the Security Council”, citing examples including Washington’s refusal to back a British resolution calling for a ceasefire in Libya in April and Franco-American differences over whether the UN should fund African-led counter-terrorist operations in the Sahel. U.S. and European diplomats managed to limit the fallout – Washington and Paris have buried their differences over the Sahel in a series of delicately worded resolutions – but their attitudes to the Council continue to drift apart.

One indicator of this trend has been a tendency of European Security Council members, and in particular the E3 of Britain, France

and two-year member Germany (which will be on the Council until the end of 2020), to take strong public stances in cases where the U.S. is unconvinced of the value of UN action.

This trend has been most notable with regard to the Korean peninsula, a trouble spot where the E3 have generally deferred to the Americans and Chinese. That changed this summer, however, after Pyongyang launched a series of missile tests breaching UN resolutions. The U.S., hoping to keep bilateral diplomacy with the DPRK alive despite the failure of the Hanoi summit between President Donald Trump and Supreme Leader Kim Jong-un, has refrained from calling Council meetings

reflect a more basic divide over the value – or inutility – of high-profile Security Council engagement in crisis diplomacy.

Events in Syria have more acutely highlighted the Trump administration's differences with its European allies on when and how to harness the Council. Although the U.S. and European allies jointly backed a resolution calling for a ceasefire in the rebel-held enclave of Idlib this September – leading to the second joint Sino-Russian veto of the year – Turkey's incursion into the Kurdish-held north east left them divided. When the E3, Belgium and Poland jointly tabled a statement in mid-October calling for a ceasefire, the U.S. struggled

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on these provocations. By contrast, the E3 have insisted on calling meetings after missile launches in both August and October as a way of reiterating the UN's relevance. The U.S. has not tried to block these discussions, but has signalled its lack of enthusiasm for them. The new U.S. Permanent Representative Kelly Craft, who has won credit for attending an unusually high number of routine meetings for a U.S. ambassador, skipped October's closed consultations on the DPRK.

European diplomats posit that their perseverance with such meetings may help Washington, as the U.S. can tell Pyongyang that it is protecting it from Security Council pressure, and in return ask for more cooperation in bilateral diplomacy. From a U.S. perspective, however, these discussions appear largely superfluous as China and Russia are firmly opposed to any new UN sanctions or even firmly worded statements on the topic. The E3 and U.S. differences in approach are in some respects largely tactical in nature. Both agree on the continued importance of UN sanctions on the DPRK (although some E3 diplomats fret that Washington could trade these away for limited North Korean nuclear concessions in the year ahead). Yet they also

over how to respond – likely reflecting policy confusion in Washington, which shifted from greenlighting the incursion to applying sanctions in protest. Unusually, the U.S. joined Russia in refusing to back the European text. (Security Council statements, unlike resolutions, require consensus support.) Although the Council managed to put out a two-line statement expressing concern over the situation – and Ambassador Craft unilaterally called for a ceasefire after public criticism for apparently siding with Moscow against U.S. allies – the lack of Western unity was striking.

While European officials continue to see the Council as the premier global forum for resolving peace and security issues, senior Trump administration officials, including President Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, take a far more jaundiced view. That scepticism has not diminished even after the departure of former National Security Advisor and long-time UN critic John Bolton. Although the U.S. has used the Council as a forum for calling out Iran – Pompeo visited Turtle Bay in August to protest Tehran's behaviour in the Gulf – this tends to come off chiefly as posturing and ultimately accentuates the divide between Washington

and Europe over the Iran nuclear deal. Indeed, European ambassadors responded to Pompeo's August presentation by unanimously asserting the need to save the accord.

The current E3 will not necessarily remain a united front at the UN. Many European diplomats suspect that Britain will drift away from France and Germany if and when Brexit eventually happens. And Berlin's voice in New York will shrink once its Council term ends. But

influence were especially obvious over Sudan. After Sudanese President Omar al-Bashir's ouster in the spring, the A3 urged the Security Council to back firm AU calls for a transition to civilian rule. Russia and China, which have close ties to the Sudanese armed forces, objected. Angered by this posture, and seemingly surprised by China's lack of deference to the continent's views, the A3 issued joint statements backing the AU position and implicitly

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even so, the differences that separate European Council members will likely remain minor compared to those that separate Europe from the U.S. As such, Washington and its European allies' diverging views on how to use the Council are liable to be a recurring source of frustration at least as long as the Trump administration is in office, as the Europeans insist on the continuing relevance of the UN and the U.S. goes its own way.

Tensions over African Crises and UN-AU Relations

While the European members of the Security Council have coordinated closely in 2019, the three African members of the body (Côte d'Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa, or the A3) have also seemed keen to stake out stronger common positions on behalf of their continent. South Africa, in particular, has worked hard to ensure A3 unity and promote positions of the African Union's (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) in New York. As we noted in a report in June, however, this has created complications in both the UN and AU, as the Security Council has resisted the A3's efforts to assert itself with respect to crisis management on the continent, and the A3 have struggled to coordinate with the PSC in Addis Ababa.

Both these problems were clearly illustrated in the last six months. The limits of A3

criticising the Security Council's inaction. These are an innovation, and a step toward more coordinated African diplomacy in the Council, even though they have not changed China's and Russia's stances.

South Africa has also found itself in an unexpected dispute with the AU PSC, ironically over an initiative to strengthen AU peace operations. For over a decade, AU members have argued that the UN should fund African-led military operations in addition to UN-led forces. Ethiopia, South Africa's predecessor in the A3, attempted to push through a resolution affirming this goal in late 2018, but the U.S. objected for a mix of financial and technical reasons. This episode led to widespread ill-feeling among American and A3 officials. South Africa sought to resolve the problem this summer by holding quiet A3-U.S. talks on how to find a way forward.

Both sides felt that, although far from decisive, these discussions were constructive and held in good faith. South Africa tabled a new resolution on the topic in early September. Yet while Western diplomats felt that the draft was a fair basis for negotiations, PSC members complained that they had not been sufficiently consulted on the text, and warned that it could place unacceptable constraints on AU decision-making in future peace operations. On 19 September, to the extreme frustration

of the South Africans, the PSC sent a letter to the A3 demanding that negotiations on the text cease. (Crisis Group will publish a fuller briefing on the practical and political obstacles to UN financing for AU operations in the near future.)

These have not been the only sources of AU-UN tensions in the last six months. The Security Council has, for example, rejected PSC calls for the appointment of a joint AU-UN envoy to Libya. In many crisis situations, such frictions raise the day-to-day transaction costs of crisis management in Africa, as the two organisations bicker over their mandates and strategies in the absence of top-level coherence. And, while it is hard for the AU to launch any large-scale peace operations without direct or indirect UN support, African leaders and mediators are increasingly liable to find ways to work around the Security Council in situations – like the political transition in Khartoum – where there is no need for peacekeepers to create stability.

Quiet Diplomacy to De-escalate Council Tensions?

The evolving tensions described above have contributed to an overall decline in the quality of Security Council diplomacy. As Council members increasingly struggle to find common ground on how to handle crises, they resort to public statements and symbolic meetings to publicise their differences. Diplomats who have returned to Turtle Bay after serving in the Council earlier in the post-Cold War period frequently comment on how there are fewer substantive negotiations than in their prior postings. Even representatives of countries outside the Council – who have traditionally argued that the body should be more transparent – fret that the Council is devoting too much

time to public meetings and too little to genuine exchanges of views in closed consultations. At the Council's May retreat with the Secretary-General, British Permanent Representative Karen Pierce suggested that she and her fellow ambassadors hold more informal meetings – without set agendas or records – to discuss how to manage their differences. This proposal was well received, and there have been at least three “Pierce formula” meetings over the last six months.

But even if these off-the-record conversations are doing some good – and it seems too soon to tell – the sheer number of disputes that continue to emerge around the Council underline that its problems are not merely a matter of diplomatic process or craft. They are more fundamentally, as we argued in April, symptoms of a broader downward trend in international cooperation. Western diplomats' confrontations with their Chinese counterparts in New York are products of deeper frictions with Beijing, European-American differences reflect widening transatlantic differences over the worth of multilateralism, and AU-UN tensions reflect African powers' longstanding desire to gain a greater say over their regional security.

If Council members can consult and solve problems quietly, they may mitigate some of the consequences of these overarching tensions. They cannot, however, remove the sources of those tensions from Turtle Bay. The incoming members of the Security Council should prepare for a rough ride. As we have argued elsewhere, there are still occasional opportunities for the UN to help resolve conflicts despite its strategic torpor. It is the job of New York-based diplomats to keep channels for communication on those opportunities alive during long periods of diplomatic frustration.

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