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# HORIZONS

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## GEOPOLITICS OF CONFUSION HOW LONG CAN THIS LAST?



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# MULTILATERALISM'S BROKEN SWORD

## THE ONGOING HISTORY OF FAILURE AT THE SECURITY COUNCIL

Richard Gowan

**I**F THERE is one thing that diplomats at the United Nations in New York can agree on, it is that the Security Council is in an unholy mess. They simply cannot agree on who is to blame.

The first half of 2018 has seen the Council, already in a parlous state after years of ugly diplomacy over the civil war in Syria, hit a series of new lows. Russian and Western diplomats have traded vicious tirades and vetoes not only over resolutions to do with Syria, but also the crises in Yemen and Gaza. Council discussions took a bizarre turn in April, as the British and Russian ambassadors quoted Lewis Carroll and Fyodor Dostoyevsky at one another in debates over the Salisbury Novichok poisoning incident.

Some observers say that the Council is in its worst state since it split over the

invasion of Iraq. Others compare it to the Cold War.

But who is at fault?

### WHO'S AT FAULT?

**A**merican and European officials naturally claim Moscow is the primary culprit. Russia, they say, has become increasingly indiscriminate in using its veto power to block Western initiatives as part of a general campaign to reassert itself as a great power.

The Russians counter that they merely want to restore some political balance in the Council, after the post-Cold War decades in which the United States and its allies have dominated UN decisionmaking.

The Trump Administration has played into the Russians' hands by

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*The Security Council in session*

Photo: United Nations

adopting a series of unpopular positions on Iran and Israel at the UN, and publicly chastising countries that fail to support it. In May 2018, the United States failed to get a single other Council member to vote with it on inserting pro-Israeli language into a resolution on the Gaza crisis, an extraordinary defeat for the UN's main power.

At times, it has appeared that Russia and the United States are locked in a deliberate unpopularity contest at the UN, adopting positions that they know will alienate the majority of other member states. Little wonder that some ask if the Security Council has a future.

**R**ussia and the United States are not the only countries that matter at the UN. China, which long avoided unnecessary controversy in New York, is increasingly assertive. For now, however, it is more focused on promoting its versions of development and human rights through UN fora than making a big fuss in the Security Council, unless it sees its interests at stake, as in the case of Myanmar.

The European members of the Council are constantly active, and France has worked especially hard to stop the Trump Administration from cutting UN operations in Francophone Africa



and Lebanon. Sweden, which began a two-year term on the council in January 2017, has earned a reputation for diplomatic resilience (and/or masochism) by trying to find common ground in the council on Syrian disputes.

**DYSFUNCTION'S DEEP ROOTS**

Nonetheless, Russia and the United States continue to shape Security Council diplomacy as the two most active veto holders. Prior to Donald Trump's inauguration, some UN officials had hoped that the allegedly Russophile president might cut deals with Moscow on crises like Syria. There have been no such breakthroughs to date, either because Trump's more conservative advisers have held him back because he just lacks focus.

But while it is easy to attribute all geopolitical ills to Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin, the current crisis in the Council has deeper roots. It represents the culmination of unresolved tensions between its Permanent Members, dating back to the Kosovo and Iraq wars at the turn of the millennium. It also stems from the council's current inability to handle crises in trouble-spots across Africa and the Middle East, de-

spite deploying roughly 100,000 peacekeepers to stabilize these regions.

And while the UN is struggling to adapt to current wars, there are looming questions about its capacity to

handle future conflicts in which misinformation, cyber-weapons, and Artificial Intelligence (AI) may play a decisive part. The Council is trapped between the legacy of old wars its members cannot let go, current wars they cannot stop, and the dangers of a future that most diplomats barely understand.

There is little time in the hustle and flow of council diplomacy to step back and see this bigger picture. But a broad sense of perspective is necessary if the Security Council is to retain a useful role in international affairs.

It is tempting for its Permanent Members, in particular, to treat the UN as nothing more than a venue for bouts of political theater. The Security Council plays an important function in allowing diplomats to vent over incidents such as the Salisbury poisoning that they do not want to spiral too far out of control.

But the Security Council should not just exist for show. It also offers a

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framework for the big powers to carve out political compromises over areas of mutual concern, such as the Middle East, when other diplomatic avenues are closed. The United States and Soviet Union were able to make such deals over UN peacekeeping in Lebanon and on the Golan Heights in the 1970s despite their overarching strategic differences. They also turned to the Council to facilitate the end of Cold War conflicts from Afghanistan to Central America in the 1980s and 1990s.

This tradition of pragmatic, UN deal-making risks getting lost in the current round of bickering around Turtle Bay.

**FROM KOSOVO TO SYRIA**

The current crisis in the Security Council is best understood as an echo (or perhaps an amplification) of its earlier breakdowns over Kosovo and Iraq in 1999 and 2003, respectively. These disputes defined the diplomatic battle lines for the last decade's arguments over Libya and Syria.

In the first half 1990s, the United States and its allies tried to work through major international crises via the existing mechanisms of the Security Council, and deliberately treated post-Soviet Russia as a peer in these efforts.

The results were mixed and sometimes appalling, as the Council failed to get a grip on the Balkan civil wars of succession and failed to act seriously over the Rwandan genocide.

But, even in the post-Yugoslav struggle, East-West tensions were not the primary cause of UN paralysis. American skittishness over foreign entanglements and the UN's overall unpreparedness to handle the complex wars of the post-Cold War era set the organization up to fail.

East-West frictions returned to the UN in 1998 and 1999 over Kosovo, as Russia threatened to use its veto to block any UN action against Yugoslavia. U.S. President Bill Clinton's decision to intervene regardless was, at least according to President Putin, the first proof of Washington's disregard for the basic rules of UN diplomacy.

The Bush Administration's intervention in Iraq four years later confirmed this trend, and while President Barack Obama came to office promising to show the UN greater respect, Moscow was furious when the United States and NATO used a limited Security Council mandate for humanitarian military action in Libya in 2011 as an excuse to overthrow Colonel Muamar Gaddafi.

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little of the status it had lost during earlier crises. By 2016, when Russian forces and the Syrian allies captured the critical city of Aleppo despite furious Western protests at the UN, it was clear that its strategy of diplomatic attrition has succeeded.

The Obama Administration's decision to take an alternative route to Syria from 2011 onwards gave Russia an opportunity to reverse this trend. Obama's advisers initially hoped to find a deal with Moscow to end the Syrian conflict outside UN channels, wishing to avoid the sort of acrimony that had emerged over Libya.

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On Syria at least, Russia is now top dog in the Security Council.

**TOP DOG AND RESULTING DYSFUNCTION**

To achieve this, Moscow has not only alienated most members of the UN but created a wider crisis of confidence in the Security Council. From major Middle Eastern players

like Saudi Arabia to loyal adherents of international law like Liechtenstein, UN member states have repeatedly lined up to condemn the Council's betrayal of the Syrian people.

Even China, which initially backed Moscow and Damascus, has become increasingly nervous about its association with the war. To signal its discomfort, Beijing has recently abstained on a number of Western resolutions attacking Assad that Russia has vetoed.

Yet these small signals have come too late to change Russia's behavior. As the Syrian war has juddered

But as the conflict escalated in 2012, the United States turned to the UN to mediate a political agreement, setting the stage for years of increasingly agonizing Security Council diplomacy over the war. Recognizing Obama's unwillingness to intervene in Syria on a large scale, the Russians exacted a high price for limited diplomatic cooperation over the conflict, protecting President Bashar al-Assad from any serious UN pressure and dragging out peace talks endlessly.

With each twist, such as the 2013 Putin-Obama deal over the destruction of Syria's chemical arsenal, Moscow recaptured a

bloodily towards a conclusion, Russia and the Western powers have engaged in an open-ended succession of fierce but fruitless spats in the Council over the last stage of the war, interspersed by occasional American missile strikes against Syrian military facilities.

If Russia has incurred additional reputational damage as a result, these fights have precluded any serious discussion about a final settlement in Syria in the Council. The UN mediation effort based out of Geneva has also gone nowhere. The longer the Syrian end-game lasts, the worse the overall mood in New York will become.

*Every burst of rhetoric signals the decline of the Security Council as vehicle for more serious diplomacy.*

Ironically, Russia's success in reasserting itself vis-à-vis the United States at the UN may also prove to be a hollow victory. Whereas the Obama Administration was sincere about using the Organization as a framework to handle the Syrian crisis, many members of the Trump Administration instinctively believe in sidelining the UN on principle.

Trump's ambassador in New York, former South Carolina governor Nikki Haley, is a relatively moderate figure who did good work in 2017 negotiating a series of hefty packages of sanctions against North Korea with the Chinese.

Nonetheless, Haley has blocked any criticism of Israel in the Council, while taking every opportunity to attack Iran. She hardened her line even further after Trump turned to America's best-known critic of the United Nations, America's former Permanent Representative John Bolton, as his third National Security Adviser in April 2018.

The U.S. president's decision to pull out of the Iranian nuclear deal shortly afterwards without even a token reference to the Security

Council was a further sign of his administration's disdain for multilateral diplomacy.

Two decades after the Kosovo crisis reignited East-West tensions in the Security Council, therefore, Russia is back in a position of power at the UN—and the United States is once again distancing itself from the institution. This is the perfect formula for the sort of open diplomatic warfare that has hamstrung the forum over the last year, as neither side sees much need to restrain themselves for the sake of substantive gains or compromises. The Russians and Americans have pushed other Council members, including the British and French, into vocal criticisms of their respective positions on the Middle East. Every burst of rhetoric signals the decline of the Security Council

as vehicle for more serious diplomacy. But even where the Council is capable of collective action, it is struggling to assert itself.

**ENTRENCHED DIVISIONS**

Despite the Security Council's breakdown over Syria, the UN has remained active in multiple other conflicts. In recent years, the Council has sent blue helmet peacekeepers to the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mali, while consistently renewing the mandates for those in long-running missions like that in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).

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Some diplomats argue that this shows that the Council is still doing its job reasonably well, even if it fails on a few topline crises. Yet UN peacekeepers and mediators underperform in many crises, making the Council look even weaker.

In the last year, for example, the blue helmets have repeatedly been hit by terrorist attacks in Mali and failed to tamp down worsening violence in CAR. The UN has also struggled to jumpstart delayed elections in the DRC. The Council regularly expresses outrage or concern about such situations, but few local actors pay it much heed. Autocratic leaders such as the DRC's Joseph Kabila and South

Sudan's Salva Kiir have made a point of verbally assaulting the UN whenever possible to whip up local support.

These displays of resistance highlight divisions within the Council.

China has shielded South Sudan against a proposed arms embargo by the United States, even though this might ease the country's civil war.

Russia frequently steps up to protect African leaders from criticism by the UN, even though it has few real interests on the continent.

Until roughly 2015 or 2016, American and European diplomats were confident that they could stop disputes over Syria infecting UN diplomacy over remote issues such as the Sudans.

Yet Russia has become notably more assertive on these topics in the last eighteen months in parallel with its push to cut off diplomacy over Syria, even stirring up trouble over the small UN mission in Haiti to spite Washington.

The resulting divisions in the Security Council, although less widely reported than those over Syria or Libya, ultimately do the institution equal or

worse damage. The Council may not be able to fix high-profile crises, but it should be able to handle serious but strategically secondary rifts in places like the Sudans.

Its overall authority comes into question when and where leaders like Kabila and Kiir push back against the UN. Leading peacekeeping officials wearily note that the Security Council should be able to bring politicians from weak post-war states back into line, but other crises distract it from doing so.

**CYBERWARFARE AND ROBOT WARFARE**

If Security Council members struggle to stay on top of the current crises on their agenda, they seem even less well prepared to address upcoming security threats such as cyberwarfare and robot warfare.

The Council is too busy trying to hash out deals over the old school wars on its agenda to think very far ahead. Other parts of the UN do little better. A sporadic inter-governmental discussion process on cyber issues crashed in 2017 due to differences between the West and Russia and China over the applicability of International Humanitarian Law to online conflicts.

The United States and allies including the UK have quietly lobbied against the organization getting too involved in this field. A UN meeting on robotic warfare was delayed last year because it turned out that member states had, unintentionally, not paid for it.

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Secretary-General Antonio Guterres has urged member states to address how evolving technologies will affect future wars and find new ways to think about disarmament as a result. But diplomats question whether the Security Council, hung up on past conflicts and unable to

resolve those on its immediate agenda, can really tackle the wars of tomorrow. This is arguably an even greater threat to the organization than its short-term splits over Syria or South Sudan.

But how can it escape this impasse?

**COMPROMISE OR COMA?**

UN experts have no shortage of ideas about how the Organization can fix itself, at least in policy terms. There are multiple proposals on the table to make peace operations more effective and prepare the UN to respond to the next generation of non-traditional wars. Guterres has encouraged his staff

to review their current performance critically and brace for future challenges. But innovative policy thinking will make little or no difference if political divisions continue to hobble the Security Council.

Diplomats agree that it will be impossible to revitalize the Council unless it addresses the fundamental breakdown in trust emanating from the Syrian war. As we have seen, it is hard for the United States and Russia

in particular to find common ground over Syria without referring to the earlier crises in Kosovo, Iraq, and Libya. It is difficult to see how Washington and Moscow can truly bury their differences over these past disputes.

In the immediate term, the smoothest way out of today's crisis would be for the United States and its allies to acknowledge their defeat over Syria and commit to help reconstructing the country in tandem with Russia. This would give Moscow precisely the sort of recognition as a decisive power that it has craved in New York since the Kosovo crisis. In return, Russia could show that it is willing to work with the West after a long period of antagonism.

This might just enable some small improvements to the miserable lot of some Syrians by a small margin.

But even this sort of compromise currently feels far-fetched: Western-Russian divisions are simply too broad to bridge. There is a serious risk that, in the absence of big power compromises, the Security Council will slowly slip into a diplomatic coma.

The forum is not going to die off completely, unless there is a global conflict comparable to World War II, which did for the League of Nations. But there is a significant chance that the Security Council will dodder into irrelevance in the next five to ten years, largely cut out of major decisions on first order crises like Syria, and unable to find ways to handle future threats like cyberwarfare.

Even in this tedious scenario, the Council would most likely continue to manage a few peace operations, just as it has tended to those in Cyprus and the Middle East for decades. It would doubtless continue to churn out statements of concern on this or that crisis of the moment. But it would be largely insensible and irrelevant to rising security threats.

Some critics of the Security Council argue that the best remedy would be reforms to bring in new permanent members such as Japan and India to reflect

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current power dynamics. There is a clear theoretical case for such reforms but they are currently politically out of reach. China refuses to countenance any alterations to the Council that would give Japan a permanent seat. The United States and Russia are not much more inclined to accept innovations that would affect their privileged standing at the UN, and Britain and France are far from enthusiastic either. Security Council reform remains as far away as it has ever been.

So the most realistic, if still remote, chance for the Security Council to regain momentum is for its current permanent members to rediscover a shared sense of strategic purpose. China, Great Britain, or France could launch such a process, but Russia and the United States have primary responsibility for resetting UN diplomacy.

It is arguable that Moscow and Washington have a greater interest in keeping the Council up and running than almost any other powers. Both can use their vetoes in New York to shape diplomacy in regions, and above all the Middle

East, which are proving increasingly difficult to control by other means. Russia may have the upper hand in Syria today, but it could well need UN assistance to keep the country economically and politically stable in

future. The Trump administration could find that, for all its bravado over Iran and Gaza, it ultimately needs the UN to manage Middle Eastern crises too.

For the time being, neither Moscow nor Washington seems ready to think in conciliatory terms. But without some search for compromise, the Security Council will only become a greater mess in the years ahead. ●

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