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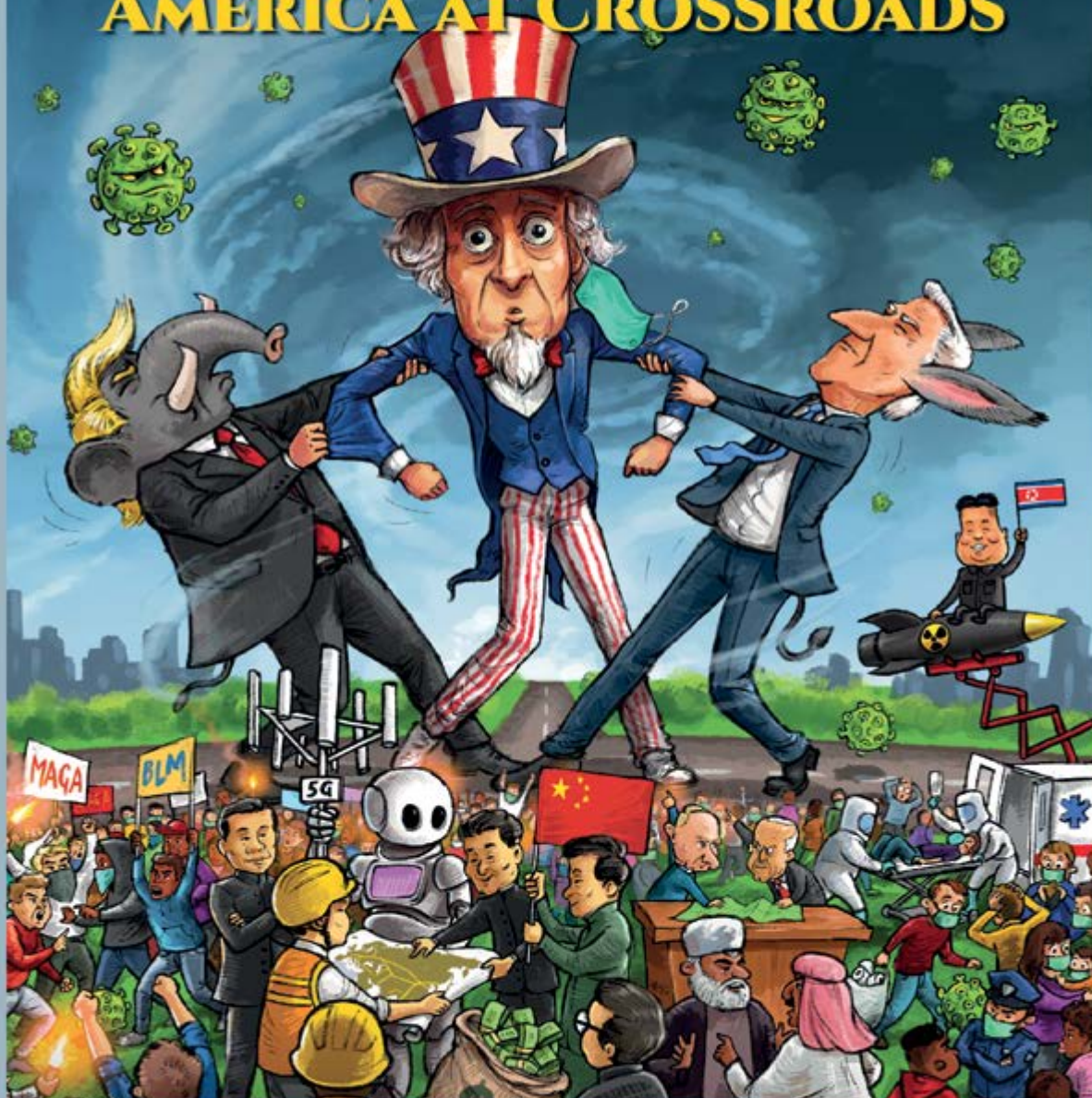
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AMERICA AT CROSSROADS



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THE UN AT CROSSROADS OF COVID-19

Richard Gowan

As the spread of COVID-19 accelerated worldwide in March 2020, there seemed to be little to feel positive about. Yet when UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire to allow medics and aid workers to respond to the pandemic in warzones, there was a glimmer of hope that his initiative could help reduce violence and suffering worldwide.

Governments and guerrilla groups around the world initially responded positively to the appeal. Yet in the weeks and months that followed, the global ceasefire was a victim of bickering between China and the United States over COVID-19, as the two big powers blocked the Security Council from backing it.

This dispute symbolized the poor state of Sino-American relations at the UN, which have deteriorated

markedly since Donald Trump took office in 2017, in line with the wider worsening of relations between Washington and Beijing. It also seemed to capture the Trump Administration's broader disdain for multilateral diplomacy. And for those states and analysts that believe the Security Council needs to do more to counter non-traditional threats—such as pandemics and climate change—it was a depressing reminder that the Council has a long way to go before it can really grip these challenges.

The saga of the global ceasefire call was only one small part of the global drama created by COVID-19. But it offered some telling insights into the roles of the America, China, the Security Council, and UN Secretary-General on the world stage at a moment of acute stress for international cooperation.

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The lights remain on in the Security Council's chamber, at least for now

DECEPTIVE OPTIMISM

In the fortnight after Guterres first proposed the ceasefire idea on 23 March, the UN estimated that conflict parties in eleven countries signaled some interest in the initiative. This figure was a little deceptive. In cases including Libya and Ukraine, conflict actors recognized the call, but kept on fighting regardless. Yet there were also cases, such as Thailand, where armed groups announced ceasefires in response to COVID-19 but didn't make an explicit reference to the UN in doing so.

The ceasefire call was also a public relations success, backed by Pope Francis

and over one hundred UN member states. Over 2 million people signed an online petition backing the concept. The International Crisis Group, for which I work, was one of many advocacy groups to add its support to the initiative, although we cautioned that it was “most likely to be embraced by some, rejected by others, and—even when accepted—observed with varying and evolving degrees of rigor.”

Perhaps most promisingly, UN Security Council diplomats in New York began talks in early April, on passing a resolution endorsing the ceasefire appeal. While China and the United

States were already at loggerheads over the origins of COVID-19 and Beijing’s initial management of the outbreak, it looked like the Council had an opportunity to signal a sense of common purpose in the face of the virus.

Yet in the second quarter of 2020, both the global ceasefire championed by Guterres and the Security Council’s debates over COVID-19 went off the rails. Only a small number of states and armed groups actually ceased hostilities and some of those that did—such as rebels in Colombia and the Philippines—formally renounced their ceasefires after little more than a month of pausing violence. In the meantime, the Security Council got bogged down in Sino-American bickering over COVID-19, only managing to pass a resolution at the beginning of July 2020. This resolution called for a 90-day humanitarian pause in conflicts worldwide, but it was clearly too little, far too late, and had no observable impact in the months that followed.

In the meanwhile, Guterres has kept calling for a new ceasefire push, but UN officials admit that it has “fizzled.” Why did the global ceasefire appeal, which seemed to hold such promise, fail to have more impact? And can the

Secretary-General and the Security Council engage more effectively with COVID-19?

AMBITIOUS GUTERRES

The global ceasefire idea was always ambitious. Local political realities got in the way of Guterres’ global vision in many conflict zones. In some cases, certain combatants were willing to cease violence but their opponents were not interested in taking up the offer. In Cameroon, for example, one rebel group was quick to endorse the global ceasefire in late March 2020, but the government simply ignored it. In Colombia, rebels instituted a month-long pause in violence but demanded extensive political talks with the government in Bogotá in order to extend it, which the government was not willing to offer.

Even where there was seeming goodwill among conflict parties to pause violence in response to COVID-19, there was often a lack of ceasefire architecture for taking advantage of these offers. It is one thing for an armed group to say it wants to reduce violence, but another to translate that wish into a technical ceasefire agreement with clear terms and some sort of security guarantee that all sides can accept. In normal times,

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the UN and international actors can help frame such agreements.

But in the first months of the pandemic UN envoys were largely unable to travel due to flight restrictions. International peacekeepers in countries like South Sudan had to limit patrols for fear of contacting or spreading the disease. International officials did their best to promote the global ceasefire idea, but these restrictions meant that they struggled to engage with conflict parties.

This may have resulted in some missed opportunities. In the Philippines, the government called a unilateral pause in operations against the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) rebels before the UN appeal. The CPP did not initially reciprocate, but it did offer a ceasefire after the UN call. Yet it didn’t work, partly because the two sides had no real way to operationalize their commitments. They pursued overlapping but uncoordinated ceasefires through April 2020, with messy results. Soldiers and communist rebels would inadvertently cross paths and end up in skirmishes. Violence increased to pre-COVID-19 levels and the CPP ended its ceasefire later in the same month.

Another reason the ceasefire sputtered may have been the nature of COVID-19 itself. In late March

2020 many observers expected the pandemic to create a sudden and deep catastrophe—including rapid spread of the disease and high levels of fatalities in fragile states. Yet in many conflict-affected areas, its impact proved less dramatic. There have been serious outbreaks of the virus in cases including Afghanistan and Yemen, but they have not significantly shaken up the calculations of warring parties, perhaps

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because the disease takes only a limited toll on those of fighting age. For all these reasons, the odds against the global ceasefire taking

flight were always significant. Addressing the UN General Assembly in September 2020, Guterres admitted that “deep mistrust, spoilers, and the weight of fighting that has festered for years” had got in the way of his original vision.

NON-TRADITIONAL THREATS

But the fact that the Security Council failed to throw its weight behind the initiative quickly sapped the initiative’s overall credibility, and turned a promising concept into a huge headache for United Nations system as a whole.

COVID-19 has presented a clear and pressing test of the Security Council’s ability to address “non-traditional security threats,” as UN officials term a grab

bag of challenges including pandemics, climate change and organized crime. The Council has engaged to some degree with these challenges in the post-Cold War era, first taking up health in the context of HIV/AIDS in 2000 and climate change starting in 2007.

With a handful of exceptions, its work in these areas has been fairly tentative, and some current term members of the Security Council would like to see it take a more active role. Belgium and Germany have prioritized climate change, while Estonia has made cybersecurity its flagship issue. But these members face pushback not only from China and Russia, which insist that the Council should concentrate on more traditional peace and security issues, but also from the Trump Administration, which has a particular dislike for talk of climate change. In July 2020, Germany decided to drop proposals for a resolution focusing on climate security—authorizing a UN envoy to tackle the subject—after the United States promised to veto it.

Of these non-traditional threats, pandemic response has often seemed to be the most promising area—aside from organized crime—

for Security Council action. In 2014, otherwise a difficult year for UN diplomacy over Syria and Ukraine, the Council united around a resolution endorsing international efforts to stamp out Ebola in West Africa. In 2019, the

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Council monitored a further Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where UN peacekeepers worked with health experts to get aid into volatile regions. Prior to COVID-19, Germany clairvoyantly signaled that it wanted to use its two-year term to spur discussion of pandemics, a personal priority

for Chancellor Angela Merkel.

LIMITED TOOLKIT

Yet COVID-19 demonstrated at least two significant weaknesses—concerning its policy tools and major power politics—in the Council's capacity to deal with global health crises.

First, as a practical matter, the Council's toolkit is still limited. As the pandemic spread, it was not entirely evident what the Security Council could concretely do about it, beyond expressing concern. In 2014, the Council's tools for dealing with Ebola in West Africa were pretty clear. The

UN had peacekeepers in Liberia who could assist with logistics and other aspects of the medical response, as well as a significant humanitarian and development presence in the other two countries affected by the disease, Guinea and Sierra Leone. By throwing its weight behind use of these UN assets to counter the disease, and encouraging member states to pledge additional resources to the effort, the Security Council added urgency to the global response to Ebola, while the United States largely coordinated the successful effort to contain the outbreak. (It helped that America and China worked collaboratively to fight the disease, rather than lobbing political grenades at each other, as they have in the COVID-19 era.)

By contrast, COVID-19 presented a threat of a different scale and nature. Already in March 2020, there were reported cases on every inhabited continent. In most states where it struck early, like Iran and Italy, there was little if any UN humanitarian or security presence, reducing the Security Council's ability to forge a response. Had a major power launched a global effort to marshal resources to meet the crisis, as America did with Ebola in 2014, the Security Council might have lent its

Had a major power launched a global effort to marshal resources to meet the crisis the Security Council might have lent its political heft to supporting that.

political heft to supporting that. But that did not happen: Washington sat on the sidelines and its biggest competitor, Beijing, did not step into its shoes.

Lacking many of the options that had been available to the UN in the Ebola crisis, the Council members spent early

April 2020 tussling over the scope of any potential resolution. All agreed that the Security Council should endorse efforts by UN peace operations to help tackle the disease in their areas of deployment—a task that the blue helmets

undertook even without the Council's urging, while trying to avoid spreading the disease themselves. But while Tunisia, which led discussions among the ten elected (E10) term members of the Council, initially envisaged a broad resolution with passages calling for international cooperation on public health issues, including training medics and developing a COVID-19 vaccine, the majority of diplomats felt the Council should not (in the words of one European official) "bite off more than it can chew" by commenting on non-security-related matters.

It was against this backdrop that both the E10 and the five permanent members (P5) of the Security Council, led by France, began to focus

on Guterres' call for a global ceasefire as a well-defined flagship topic that both served the purposes of pandemic response and clearly fell within the body's remit of preserving international peace and security. Although some of the P5, including Russia, the UK, and the United States, made it clear that they would

not sign onto any text curtailing their conduct of counter-terrorism operations, nobody was fundamentally opposed to the ceasefire idea.

BEHOLDEN TO POLITICS

The second Security Council weakness

that the episode highlighted is that, even when confronting a true global threat like the coronavirus pandemic, policy is often beholden to politics. While everyone could get behind a global ceasefire in theory, it was not anyone's overwhelming priority, and China and America in particular had bigger point-scoring goals to pursue. The United States saw the resolution as a chance to try to assign China responsibility for the disease (at first demanding that any Security Council text refer to "Wuhan virus") while refusing to accept even a passing reference to the World Health Organization (WHO) after Trump suspended funding to that body in April 2020, blaming it for failing to challenge China during the initial COVID-19 outbreak.

China's immediate priority was to block any implicit or explicit criticism of its handling of the disease, but it also saw an opportunity to embarrass the United States over its abandonment of the WHO and cast Washington as a spoiler on the Security Council. While Chinese and American officials in New York were

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ready to compromise on an indirect reference to the WHO in May, Washington nixed this deal, killing off further Security Council discussions of COVID-19 until late June 2020.

The basic reason that the Security

Council underperformed in the face of COVID-19 was, therefore, exactly the reason it underperforms on many other issues: big power tensions. This fact hardly went unnoticed in New York. Some Council members favored calling a vote on the COVID-19 resolution in early May, to see if either Beijing or Washington would really veto it. France, which had led P5 discussions of the process, demurred, along with Tunisia. One diplomat observed that the whole process was "trivial," as both China and the United States placed throwing political punches above securing a resolution, while other Council members did not feel strongly enough about the idea to challenge them.

While France and Tunisia eventually found an extremely vague formula for referring obliquely to the WHO that everyone could accept, leading to the belated passage of Security Council Resolution 2532 endorsing a 90-day humanitarian pause in conflicts worldwide, the whole episode was discouraging for those who would like to see the Security Council do more to address non-traditional threats. Once the resolution was out of the way, the Council quickly turned its attention to other more concrete matters, such as humanitarian assistance to Syria and sanctions on Iran.

When the 90-day ceasefire period finished at the end of September, nobody bothered to mark its passing, as it has been a non-event.

Only one rebel group—the Ejército de Liberación Nacional in Colombia, which had already temporarily laid down arms in spring 2020—expressed any interest in taking up the Security Council's call, but this went nowhere. When the 90-day ceasefire period finished at the end of September, nobody bothered to mark its passing, as it has been a non-event.

UNHEALED RIFTS

While UN officials and other mediators have kept up their peace-making efforts through the pandemic—and there have been some reductions of violence in cases including Libya, Syria, and Ukraine during the year—they have tended not cite the global ceasefire idea with any frequency. Governments and

armed groups appear to be basing their decisions for and against peace according to political and military factors largely unrelated to the pandemic.

Resolutions 2532 has at least offered Guterres and his advisors a mandate to keep pressing the Security Council to take the security risks of COVID-19

seriously. He has been increasingly blunt in his briefings on the topic. "The pandemic is a clear test of international cooperation," Guterres told the council in late September 2020, "a test we have essentially failed."

But the rifts that COVID-19 revealed in the Security Council this summer are far from healed. At the same September meeting in which Guterres offered his blunt assessment of failure, America's ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft accused China of "unleashing this plague onto the world." Her Chinese counterpart Zhang Jun responded that "the United States has been spreading a political virus and disinformation and creating confrontation and division."

Nonetheless, it is unlikely that the Security Council will stop talking about COVID-19 for a while. After all, it is clear that the coronavirus is not merely a pathogen causing a health crisis but also a catalyst for economic shocks that can

(as we have already seen in Lebanon) lead to political crises and disorder.

It is not clear how the disease will play out region by region—and so far it has not been quite as destructive in some weak countries as seemed likely in March 2020—but it would be a brave ambassador at the UN who would bet that the health, economic, and social fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic will not lead to more political instability.

A Biden Administration would be likely to take the Security Council more seriously than Trump has done to date, and would also invest more in addressing non-traditional threats.

STILL ILL-PREPARED

Guterres should continue to take an expansive view of his mandate to report on COVID-19 to the Security Council—offering its members early warnings of potential virus-related crises and conflicts based on UN economic and humanitarian analysis as well political reporting. That could give Security Council members chances to grapple with looming crises before they run out of control, although it is not clear that policymakers in Washington, Beijing, or Moscow will respond with alacrity.

To date, the Security Council has proved ill prepared to respond to a global challenge on the scale of COVID-19. This Secretary-General cannot resolve the rifts among the big powers that severely hamper the work of the Security Council.

But Guterres can at least use Resolution 2532 as the basis to warn Security Council members of the pandemic’s evolving security implications, in the hope that they will respond a little better to the risks it creates than they have so far.

Whether Security Council members—and specifically China and the United States—will respond positively is a different question. It is clear that the forthcoming U.S. election will have a significant impact on

American policy at the UN. A Biden Administration would be likely to take the Security Council more seriously than Trump has done to date, and would also invest more in addressing non-traditional threats.

So in the case of a Biden victory, the story of the global ceasefire could provide some useful food-for-thought in Washington about how to manage the security implications of future pandemics and other challenges like climate change more effectively. Yet U.S. tensions with China at the UN are liable to persist, whoever sits in the White House. The global ceasefire debate may have ultimately been “trivial” but it stands as a cautionary tale of how big power tensions may reshape and complicate multi-lateral diplomacy in the years ahead. ●