



Q&A

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What Changed for the World's Conflicts at the UN General Assembly?

The annual United Nations General Assembly high-level session in the last week of September offered leaders and diplomats the chance to address today's gravest crises. UN Director Richard Gowan and Senior Analyst Ashish Pradhan reflect on what happened and its potential impact on crisis diplomacy.

What were the most important trends observable at the General Assembly?

The main priority for many participants appeared to be de-escalating crises in the Middle East and North Africa in the wake of the 14 September attacks on Saudi oil installations. There was a huge amount of speculation at the start of the week over whether U.S. President Donald Trump would meet his Iranian counterpart Hassan Rouhani. While that proved impossible – Iran refused a meeting without guarantees on sanctions relief, and the U.S. was unwilling to offer them prior to the meeting – some lower-profile discussions took place on how to solve active conflicts in the region.

There was notable diplomatic activity around Yemen and Libya. The UK, Kuwait and Sweden convened a new “small group” on Yemen, which also included the permanent

members of the Security Council and Germany, in an effort to coordinate diplomatic support to UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths' peacemaking efforts. The participants envisage expanding the group to include some of the powers directly involved in the Yemeni civil war, potentially including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), in future meetings of this group. Both the Huthis and the Saudis have signalled that they want to de-escalate a conflict that could trigger a broader regional confrontation. This could lead to mutual de-escalation steps that could support the start of a meaningful UN process.

France and Italy pulled together a similar discussion on restarting the UN-led peace process in Libya. That process fell apart after General Khalifa Haftar (who controls the east of the country) tried to seize the capital Tripoli earlier this year, sparking a war between his forces and those nominally loyal to the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). The Security Council has been divided over how to act on Libya since then, so this was a chance to reboot the UN approach. Significantly, the Franco-Italian meeting involved not only Egypt and the UAE, which support Haftar, but also Turkey, which backs the GNA.

These meetings at the UN are not decisive in themselves, but send signals about powers' willingness to cooperate on fixing a crisis. In principle, the fact that France and Italy co-convened talks on Libya was positive, as Paris has ties to Haftar while Rome favours the GNA. It probably wasn't a coincidence that Haftar

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announced his willingness to engage in UN-led talks last Thursday, the same day as the meeting. But the stagecraft wasn't perfect. GNA Prime Minister Fayez al-Sarraj used his speech to the General Assembly to brand the General a "war criminal".

There was also a glimmer of hope on Syria, as Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced the formation of a Constitutional Committee – involving both supporters and opponents of President Bashar al-Assad – to meet in Geneva under UN auspices this autumn. The UN has been working on this idea as a means to frame a post-war settlement for almost two years, although many of Assad's enemies fear it will be a sham. It does nothing to address the most pressing threat in Syria, a potentially brutal battle for the rebel-held enclave of Idlib in Syria's north west. Nor are representatives of the Kurdish Syrian Defence Forces – which hold a quarter of the country – set to participate.

Still, after a long period in which the UN has been adrift over Syria, this is at least a small win for Guterres. And overall the diplomatic activity on the Middle East and North Africa – even including President Trump's apparent openness to talking with Rouhani – suggested that both the P5 and regional powers see a common interest in lowering the temperature in the region.

Did leaders also focus on crises in Africa?

The deteriorating security situation in the Sahel, where jihadi groups are gaining territory and inter-communal bloodshed is increasing, generated a high level of concern. French President Emmanuel Macron made a pitch for strengthening both the UN peace operation in Mali and regional counter-terrorism efforts in his General Assembly speech, and Secretary-General Guterres said the world was "losing ground" in the face of violence in the region. While the General Assembly offers a good platform for leaders to raise the alarm on a regional crisis like this, Macron's focus on a military-led response overlooks that the various military

missions already operating in the Sahel have been unable to check escalating violence. As Crisis Group has argued for several years, a more coherent political strategy, potentially including dialogue with a wider array of armed groups, need to complement security operations.

There was also an unusual high-level meeting of the Peacebuilding Commission (normally a bit of an afterthought in General Assembly week) on the situation in Burkina Faso, where jihadi groups have been gaining ground this year. Discussions about humanitarian assistance and community-level conflict resolution were constructive, although some participants felt that the ideas under discussion still do not match the gravity of the brewing crisis and the level of violence on the ground.

More positively, leaders welcomed two new African leaders – Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok of Sudan and President Felix Tshisekedi of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Hamdok, who leads the transitional administration in Khartoum that is meant to pave the way to civilian rule after the fall of Omar al-Bashir earlier this year, handled the opportunity deftly. He won plaudits for signing a pledge of media freedom and agreeing to let the High Commissioner for Human Rights set up a network of offices in Sudan, including in the conflict-affected areas of Darfur, Blue Nile, South Kordofan and East Sudan. Sudan faces an enormous economic crisis, and Hamdok used his trip to New York to call for more economic aid and the end to U.S. sanctions. While his government still relies on the goodwill of the Sudanese military and security services, the Prime Minister made a convincing case for backing the transition.

Tshisekedi has also been trying to win international friends since he took office in Kinshasa at the start of this year after contested elections. His priority has been improving relations with Rwanda and Uganda in particular, with the goal of cooperating against the numerous armed groups that destabilise the eastern DRC. He continued this campaign in New York, participating in a meeting on the Great Lakes

to discuss proposals – apparently originally tabled by Rwanda – to create a new regional security mechanism. This would reportedly permit Ugandan and Rwandan troops to conduct anti-militia operations on Congolese soil with the DRC’s permission, possibly supported by Angolan and Tanzanian troops.

Regional security cooperation is certainly needed to tackle eastern DRC’s myriad problems, but President Tshisekedi will have to proceed cautiously. Uganda and Rwanda have intervened in the past in DRC and local memories of abuses their forces committed are a major factor in local and regional tensions. Tshisekedi ought to ensure that any help from his neighbours fits into a political and security plan that makes sense for the DRC. But at least he is talking constructively with his neighbours, and also seems keen to have positive relations with the UN, in contrast to Kabila whose relations with the world body at the end of his tenure were acrimonious.

If diplomats came away from the General Assembly cautiously positive about the DRC, they are worried about the potential for more violence in Burundi – with possible spillover effects in the DRC in particular – around elections next year. The UN still has an envoy to Burundi, but many Security Council members have lost confidence in UN officials’ ability to monitor (let alone affect) the political situation. No new ideas on what to do emerged at the General Assembly.

What other crises were priorities in New York?

There was an awful lot of political theatre around Venezuela, with delegations representing both President Nicolás Maduro and his rival Juan Guaidó attending the General Assembly. But while three high-level events covered the crisis – including one involving President Trump – there was more posturing than real diplomacy over how to find a political solution. The only notable development may have been in Trump’s main speech to the General Assembly, in which he implicitly ruled out any direct

U.S. intervention (he noted that Washington would “await” the fall of Maduro, rather than force it). This will have disappointed some of Guaidó’s more hardline supporters, who have continued to hope for U.S. military support. As Crisis Group has argued throughout the crisis, the best way out of the Maduro-Guaidó stand-off remains a negotiated solution involving early, internationally monitored presidential elections as well as political guarantees for both the ruling chavistas and opposition. That did not come any closer last week.

Perhaps the General Assembly’s most disturbing feature was the obvious level of Indian-Pakistani animosity over Kashmir. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan not only condemned India’s decision to remove Kashmir’s status as a state and ensuing security operations there, but raised the possibility of an all-out war involving nuclear weapons. Pakistan has been working hard to keep Kashmir high on the UN agenda, sending Security Council diplomats daily briefings on human rights abuses, while India insists that it is solely an internal issue. In that vein, Prime Minister Narendra Modi did not refer to it at all in his General Assembly speech, which came shortly before Khan’s. The crisis will, at best, continue to poison relations between Islamabad and New Delhi, although the UN seems unlikely to be able to do much about it. While China demanded a Security Council meeting on Kashmir in August, the first since 1971, the majority of members appeared disinclined to irritate the Indians.

Also on the Asian front, there were a number of meetings during the General Assembly on the plight of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh, but no real sign of a viable solution. Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina underlined that her country cannot

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bear the burden of housing the refugees indefinitely. In one potentially interesting development, Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi met with officials from Bangladesh and Myanmar to discuss setting up a new trilateral working group on repatriation. Beijing has refused to let the Security Council take any serious action over the Rohingya crisis, and may be looking for ways to settle a situation that complicates its Belt and Road Initiative on its terms rather than via the UN.

China's domestic and international behaviour came up in a number of meetings. The U.S. and UK co-convened one on the situation of the Uighurs in western China. Western diplomats also used the meeting with President Tshisekedi noted above to raise concerns about China's growing influence in central Africa. These criticisms are indicative of a hardening of Western attitudes toward China at the UN in the last year.

As Crisis Group has noted in the past, the U.S. and Europeans have adopted a policy of "mutual accommodation" with Beijing in the Security Council, agreeing to avoid major public battles similar to those with Russia over Syria. But there are signs of this accommodation cracking. Western diplomats raised the Uighur question in the Security Council this summer, while China came close to vetoing a resolution renewing the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan in September as it did not reference the benefits of Beijing's Belt and Road Initiative for Afghans (Beijing eventually backed down and allowed the resolution through in return for a reference to "regional cooperation and connectivity"). These small spats are not yet significantly impeding the work of the UN. But they may be early signs that deepening Sino-American competition will eventually become a more serious obstacle to multilateral crisis diplomacy.