



Council of Despair? The Fragmentation of UN Diplomacy

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What's new? Longstanding doubts about the effectiveness of the UN Security Council are intensifying, due to deepening tensions among the U.S. and its allies and between Western powers and Russia and China.

Why does it matter? As tensions build on the Security Council, there is a risk that irreconcilable differences over select issues – Israel-Palestine and Ukraine, for example – could paralyse the body, undermining its broader credibility.

What should be done? Security Council members should preserve the forum's utility by finding compromises where possible – such as on Sahel military missions, Libya and Venezuela – while accepting that some disputes may be intractable.

I. Overview

In the first four months of 2019, the UN Security Council faced a series of significant crises in the world – and failed to make a significant impact on any of them. Council members have sparred bitterly over Venezuela, struggled to sustain the Yemeni peace process, and failed to come to common positions on events in Sudan and Libya. This lacklustre performance is symptomatic of worsening tensions between the forum's five veto-wielding permanent members and the wider erosion of international cooperation. The Council's inaction means that current crises have the potential to escalate international tensions, further eroding the UN's credibility. If Council members want the body to retain some leverage – and act as a vehicle for their own influence – they need to restore some sense of common purpose.

Council ambassadors are attending an annual retreat on 2 May 2019, which offers a chance for them to discuss ways to ease relations. They should take steps to de-escalate simmering arguments on issues where agreement among the permanent five could be within reach. First, France and the U.S. should end a cycle of unproductive disputes in the Council about the costs and goals of UN and non-UN military missions in the Sahel, instead settling on a joint approach to stabilising the region, which is in both their interests. Secondly, the Council as a whole should overcome dangerous splits over how to handle the worsening violence in Libya, with an immediate focus on securing a ceasefire and relaunching UN-brokered talks. Lastly, all

Council members should suspend their public arguments over Venezuela, which have made it harder to agree on political and humanitarian strategies there. Even if the Council can ease tensions on these crises, it may well split over issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But to retain a minimum of credibility, Council members need to hang together where possible.

II. Council Diplomacy: From Bad to Worse

The Council has been in trouble for most of the last decade, divided over the war in Syria and largely irrelevant to international tensions from Ukraine to the South China Sea. Many diplomats and commentators wrote the body off years ago, assuming that worsening relations among the U.S., Russia and China would inevitably paralyse it. Some predictions of the body's demise have been overstated. The Council stepped up to tackle the Korean crisis in 2017 – imposing powerful sanctions on Pyongyang – and united to back the fragile peace process in Yemen at the end of 2018. It continues to oversee peace operations involving 90,000 personnel in Africa and the Middle East. But the Council is showing new signs of strain.

This briefing, based on discussions with diplomats and UN officials in New York as well as Crisis Group's work in the relevant conflict areas, offers an overview of these strains – and ideas about how Council members could ease them.¹ It highlights three damaging trends in the Council: (i) growing divisions between President Donald Trump's administration and traditional U.S. allies, including France and Britain, in New York; (ii) persistent and often worsening distrust between the Western powers and China and Russia; and (iii) tensions between the permanent and elected members of the Council over how the institution should work, including African states' mounting frustration with how the UN treats their continent.

These factors are combining to hamstring the Council's collective response to crises. This is disturbing for three reasons in particular. The first is that, for all its flaws, the forum remains the best available mechanism for major powers to formalise compromises over severe crises such as North Korea's nuclear tests. A second is that the Council's support remains essential to UN mediators grappling with peace processes and regional conflicts from the Sahel to Syria. Divisions in New York complicate these peacemakers' already daunting tasks. Third, and perhaps less tangibly, the Council's frequent public failures validate widespread talk of a "crisis of the international order", encouraging populist and nationalist forces that reject multilateralism.

Some of the causes of the Security Council's malaise are deep-seated and far beyond the ability of ambassadors in New York to resolve. Security Council diplomats often note in private that they would like to work together better, but that their political masters in capitals are not interested in compromise. Nonetheless, drawing on

¹ Except where otherwise indicated, this briefing is based on Crisis Group interviews conducted in New York between 15 March and 25 April 2019. It also draws from Crisis Group's extensive work on many of the crises on the Security Council's agenda. The Council ambassadors' annual retreat is scheduled for 2 and 3 May 2019. The last such retreat, held in Sweden in April 2018, allowed ambassadors to address and reduce tensions over the use of chemical weapons in Syria and the Salisbury poisoning incident. Security Council Report, "Security Council's retreat with the Secretary-General", *What's in Blue?*, 20 April 2018.

recent Crisis Group work on crises on the Council's agenda, this briefing concludes with suggestions on how Council members could de-escalate current tensions and restore some sense of order at the UN.

III. U.S. Policy and UN Divisions

New and surprising splits are emerging among the five permanent members of the Council, or P5. In the course of the Syrian war, diplomats became accustomed to the three Western P5 members (Britain, France and the U.S.) clashing with China and Russia. But there are increasing frictions within the Western bloc, too. France and the U.S. have butted heads over whether the UN should support regional counter-terrorist operations in the Sahel and how to handle Hizbollah in Lebanon.² The U.S. threatened to veto a British-drafted resolution on Yemen because it included language on humanitarian issues and human rights that Washington felt was weighted against the Saudi-led coalition there.³ The Americans also failed to engage with UK calls for a ceasefire in Libya after the upsurge in fighting there in April 2019.

Such divisions are hardly unprecedented – Britain, France and the U.S. have split in the Council over crises from Suez to Iraq – but they reflect the Trump administration's increasingly sceptical approach to the UN. Since Nikki Haley arrived as Trump's first ambassador to the UN in 2017, the U.S. has picked fights with its main allies at the UN. Haley angered France by questioning the budgets of UN operations that Paris prioritises, such as those in the Central African Republic and Democratic Republic of Congo. She fell out badly with both the British and French over the Trump administration's decision to move the U.S. embassy to Israel to Jerusalem in December 2017.

By late 2017, one French diplomat was willing to declare that Franco-British-American cooperation at the UN was "dead".⁴ Nonetheless, the three powers managed to patch up their relations despite frequent spats. This was in part due to Haley's own collegial if hard-headed diplomatic style. Arguments with Russia over chemical weapons incidents in Syria and the Salisbury poisoning incident also pushed the three Western powers back together in 2018.

Haley's departure at the end of last year, however, presaged a renewed deterioration of relations. Over the last four months, with no permanent representative at the helm, the U.S. mission to the UN has often seemed adrift (even representatives of countries that regularly oppose American positions are quite nostalgic for the Haley era, when they had a strong interlocutor).⁵ Nonetheless, the U.S. has taken steps at the UN that have disquieted its allies.

These steps cover crises from Venezuela and the Golan Heights to the Sahel and Libya. In the Venezuelan case, the U.S. has used the UN as a platform to air its

² Colum Lynch, "Trump weighs vetoing France's African anti-terrorism plan", *Foreign Policy*, 13 June 2017. The U.S. also threatened to veto the annual renewal of the mandate for the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in 2017 over the mission's failure to contain Hizbollah. The mandate renewal for UNIFIL in 2018 was less contentious, but the issue may resurface this year.

³ Crisis Groups interviews, New York, December 2018.

⁴ Crisis Group researcher's interview in another capacity, 30 October 2017.

⁵ Crisis Group interviews, Asian and African diplomats, New York, 29 March and 15 April 2019.

demands for President Nicolás Maduro to step aside, rather than a space for real negotiations about the country's future. In February, the U.S. tabled a call for new elections in the country that Washington knew was bound to be vetoed by Maduro's supporters Russia and China (it duly was) while in April, Vice President Mike Pence visited the Council to demand that the UN recognise Maduro's rival Juan Guaidó.⁶

Britain and France had already recognised Guaidó as Venezuela's legitimate leader (as have the other three European countries currently sitting in the Council, Belgium, Germany and Poland) but the U.S. approach has left them uneasy. France in particular appears concerned that the U.S. hard line has closed off any chance for compromise with Russia and China over Maduro's future, and complicated discussions of impartial aid to suffering Venezuelans. It is hard for the Europeans to differ with the U.S. on this issue, especially given support for Guaidó among Latin American countries, but they would prefer to limit fights over it in the Council.⁷

President Trump's March decision to recognise Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights caused a more open rift with the Europeans, leaving them in another tricky diplomatic spot. While rapidly reasserting their position that the Golan is Syrian territory, the Europeans avoided a showdown in the Council or UN General Assembly over Trump's decision comparable to that over Jerusalem in 2017.⁸ Though Kuwait, the sole Arab country on the Council at present, worked up a draft resolution condemning Trump's position, U.S. allies concluded that tabling it risked a destructive argument over the validity of longstanding UN resolutions on Israel – notably Resolution 242 of 1967, which remains a central plank of discussions of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – that could worsen the situation further.

European diplomats and other U.S. allies worry that the Trump administration may force an ugly debate over these issues in the near future anyway by tabling a Middle East peace plan that does not offer the Palestinians a sovereign state.⁹ If the U.S. takes this path it is likely to find itself isolated and subject to considerable criticism in the Council. Yet it is possible that Trump will take precisely this course on purpose, repeating his unilateral approach to the Jerusalem and Golan questions, effectively marginalising the Council's role in Israeli-Palestinian affairs. This would be a serious slight to the Europeans, who have always prized the Council's status as an arbiter on Middle East affairs as a source of diplomatic leverage.

In the meantime, the U.S. and France appear to be limbering up for lower-level but trust-sapping arguments over the deteriorating security situation in the Sahel. Over the last two years, France has pushed for the Council to both reinforce the UN

⁶ Margaret Besheer, "UN Security Council fails to find consensus on Venezuela crisis", *Voice of America*, 28 February 2019; Clyde Hughes, "Pence urges Security Council to revoke Venezuela credentials", *UPI*, 10 April 2019. The UN's recognition of a government and its representatives is a matter for the General Assembly and its Credential Committee rather than the Security Council.

⁷ Crisis Group interviews, European diplomats, New York, March and April 2019. These concerns about U.S. policy parallel those of European officials in Latin America. Crisis Group interview, European diplomat, Bogotá, 1 April 2019.

⁸ "Europe at UN says Golan is not Israeli territory", *AFP*, 26 March 2019.

⁹ For evidence of this potential approach, see Anne Gearan, "Trump peace package for Middle East likely to stop short of Palestinian statehood", *The Washington Post*, 14 April 2019; and Jacob Magid, "In apparent dismissal of the two-state solution, Kushner says past efforts 'failed'", *The Times of Israel*, 23 April 2019.

Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA) and offer practical support to the parallel regional counter-terrorist force, the G5 Sahel. The U.S. has consistently questioned both priorities on cost grounds.

While Security Council ambassadors visited Mali and neighbouring Burkina Faso in March at France's instigation – and came away gloomy about the UN's ability to contain jihadists in the region – the U.S. continues to indicate that it will block significant assistance to the G5 Sahel. It has also threatened to table cuts to MINUSMA unless the Malian government advances domestic political reforms and re-establishes state services in the north of the country rather than, in the view of American officials and other analysts, rely excessively on the peacekeepers for security. The U.S. would also like MINUSMA to focus more attention on central Mali, where violence is rising, though this could mean redeploying peacekeepers from the north of the country. French officials worry that this would allow jihadists to gain strength in the north.¹⁰

This MINUSMA debate will come to a head this summer and, if past bouts of Franco-American diplomacy over the G5 Sahel are any guide, could be time-consuming and toxic. This should be put in perspective: past U.S. administrations, including President Barack Obama's, have tussled with France in the past over the costs of stabilising its former colonies in the region. Many UN officials are sceptical about the utility of MINUSMA, which has lost over 100 personnel to jihadist attacks, and feel that France should be more open to criticisms of the G5 Sahel's patchy military and human rights records.¹¹ While U.S. and French officials recognise that they share an interest in stabilising the Sahel – and Council members as a group are especially worried by jihadist advances in Burkina Faso – there is a risk that Franco-American discussions will be spoiled by financial disputes and diplomatic brinkmanship.¹²

By contrast, frictions between the UK and U.S. are noteworthy in part because British diplomats have long prioritised keeping the Americans close when they can. Nonetheless, UK-U.S. relations foundered this April after General Khalifa Haftar launched an all-out assault on Tripoli. The British rapidly put together a resolution calling for a ceasefire and singling out Haftar for criticism.¹³ This ran into objections from Russia (which backs Haftar) and African Council members (who have questioned the Council's role in Libya since it authorised the 2011 intervention). But the biggest obstacle proved to be the Americans. According to differing accounts, U.S. diplomats either refused to discuss the British text or offered differing positions on it.¹⁴ Some observers assumed that the Americans simply lacked clear instructions, though there is growing evidence that President Trump and his National Security Advisor John Bolton tacitly or actively encouraged Haftar's advance – reversing

¹⁰ U.S. priorities for the Malian government include: (i) progress in redeploying administrative and security services in the northern Kidal region; (ii) progress on the disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration of armed groups; and (iii) constitutional reforms. Crisis Group interview, UN official, Bamako, 3 April 2019.

¹¹ See Crisis Group Africa Report N°258, *Finding the Right Role for the G5 Sahel Joint Force*, 12 December 2017.

¹² Crisis Group interviews, New York, April 2019.

¹³ Michelle Nichols, "UN Security Council considers demanding Libya ceasefire", Reuters, 16 April 2019.

¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews and correspondence, New York, April 2019.

overnight four years of U.S. policy backing unconditionally the Tripoli-based government – leaving the UK diplomatically exposed in New York.¹⁵

Many diplomats see a pattern in these divisions between the Americans, British and French: they assume that Bolton, a veteran and acute critic of the UN, and Secretary of State Michael Pompeo are quite deliberately taking steps to minimise the Council's role and limit the scope of UN conflict management tools like peace operations. While it may be possible to overestimate Bolton's involvement in every last decision involving the UN (the administration was instinctively anti-multilateral before he came on board, after all), the U.S. does now seem intent on circumscribing the Council's role. Some diplomats hope that this will change when Haley's successor, former U.S. ambassador to Canada Kelly Craft, arrives in New York at some point in the coming months, but this is far from certain.¹⁶

In the meantime, efforts by the European members of the Council to mount a systematic defence of the Council and multilateralism have yielded mixed results. France and Germany, which happened to hold successive monthly presidencies of the Council in March and April, did a good job of presenting their back-to-back tenures as a single package, highlighting issues such as international humanitarian law. The UK, conscious of its potential isolation after Brexit, has made a point of working closely with its EU partners and in particular Germany.¹⁷ In public relations terms, the Europeans have done well at the UN. But the U.S. has not allowed EU members to project their multilateral ideals unchallenged. Washington threatened to kill a German-drafted resolution on sexual violence in conflict in April because of a passing reference to "sexual and reproductive health", which the U.S. read as pro-abortion. The Germans finally backed down.¹⁸

Contretemps like these highlight the underlying reality that the Western group is splintering in the Security Council, is liable to fragment further while President Trump remains in office and could indeed break down even more fundamentally over an issue like the two-state solution.

IV. Russia and China's Strategies

The current lack of strategic unity among the Western members of the Security Council has created diplomatic space for Russia and China to advance their interests in New York. The extent to which there is a coordinated Sino-Russian front at the

¹⁵ See "Trump discussed 'shared vision' in phone call with Libyan warlord Haftar", AFP, 19 April 2019.

¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, New York, April 2017. Trump's initial pick to replace Haley, Heather Nauert, withdrew over questions about the immigration status of a former domestic employee. At the time of writing, Ambassador Craft (previously based in Ottawa) has not faced a Senate confirmation hearing. Diplomats speculate that she will arrive in New York in June or July. Steve Holland, "Trump picks envoy to Canada Kelly Craft for UN ambassador", Bloomberg, 23 February 2019.

¹⁷ While France turned down a German suggestion that the two countries should be joint diplomatic leads ("penholders") on Mali in the Security Council, the UK agreed to "share the pen" on both Darfur and resolutions concerning sanctions on Libya.

¹⁸ Nonetheless, the resolution "for the first time makes specific calls for greater support for children born as a result of rape in conflict, as well as their mothers, who can face a lifetime of stigma. It also gave prominence to the experiences of men and boys". Liz Ford, "UN waters down rape resolution to appease US's hardline abortion stance", *The Guardian*, 23 April 2019.

UN is source of constant diplomatic speculation. The two powers frequently align their positions closely, generally insisting that the Security Council should avoid overreach, especially where human rights are concerned. In some cases, they table joint resolutions articulating these minimalist positions as counters to Western texts.¹⁹ Yet in many cases, China seems less keen to invite controversy than Russia, and has a solid track record of compromises with the U.S. and Europeans.

Russia, having weathered a prolonged period of condemnation in the Council over its Syrian policy, continues to grow more assertive in UN debates. The Russian mission has been vocal in countering the U.S. anti-Maduro push at the UN, bringing together a caucus of pro-Maduro ambassadors for a photo shoot with the Venezuelan foreign minister at the Security Council in February.²⁰

Behind the scenes, Russia has moved to limit the Council's room for action in cases involving its friends. As noted above, it opposed any condemnation of the Haf-tar offensive in April. A little earlier in the same month, it also blocked (with African support) British and German proposals for a UN statement on the fall of President Omar al-Bashir of Sudan. Having cultivated good relations with the Sudanese government as part of a broader strategy to gain influence in Africa, the Russians insisted that his replacement was a domestic matter. While German ambassador Christoph Heusgen, the president of the Council, briefed journalists that the Council was "dealing with the issue", it issued no formal collective statement on the coup – an astonishing development, given the UN's history of intense if difficult engagement with Sudan over many years.²¹

More broadly, Russia is becoming more systematic in its approach to opposing U.S. and European initiatives that it does not like at the UN. In the early years of the Syrian war, Moscow appeared intent on defending President Bashar al-Assad in the Security Council, but was less assertive on most other conflicts, Ukraine aside. It largely allowed the U.S., French and British to set the agenda on African peacekeeping questions, for example. This is changing. Russia has increasingly refused to go along with the Western powers on such matters. Last year it strongly objected to, and ultimately abstained on, a resolution on renewing the UN Stabilisation Mission in the Central African Republic (CAR) that did not recognise Moscow's efforts to mediate the conflict in collaboration with the Sudanese through the "Khartoum process".²² This

¹⁹ In the February Venezuela debates noted above, Russia tabled a minimalist resolution calling for a political solution but putting no real pressure on Maduro. China supported this, but few other Council members did so. In the German-initiated debate on sexual violence in conflict, China and Russia devised a joint resolution setting out a more limited approach to the issue than the German text, but this also gained little support. There are rumours that the Chinese and Russians also collaborated on a resolution on sanctions relief for North Korea before this year's Trump-Kim summit in Hanoi, but had to drop it when the meeting fell apart.

²⁰ Farnaz Fassihi, "Venezuela's Maduro government form UN coalition against foreign influence", *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 February 2019.

²¹ "Sudan's military removes al-Bashir: All the latest updates", Al Jazeera, 12 April 2019. See Heiko Nitzschke, "Sudan," in Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, *The Security Council in the 21st Century* (Boulder, 2015).

²² Russia also wanted the Security Council to recognise its role in arming and training CAR's armed forces. France and other Western members of the Council remain suspicious of this.

March, it abstained again on a new mandate for the UN Mission in South Sudan over a minor point of language that even China accepted.²³

Abstentions of this type lack the power of vetoes, and receive concomitantly less attention.²⁴ Nonetheless, historical precedents suggest that a P5 abstention on a resolution will reduce its political credibility with the parties to a conflict.²⁵ Russia's willingness to flag its dissatisfaction with recent resolutions in this way arguably is in part indicative of its growing interest in African matters (symbolised not only by Moscow's diplomatic overtures to Khartoum but also by the deployment of private military contractors to CAR last year). But it is also procedural. The Russians have long felt that the Western powers do not take their views sufficiently seriously in consultations on many Security Council issues, including African cases. Their abstentions may be a signal that, in future, Moscow will demand a still more active role in these negotiations.

Nonetheless, the primary concern for Moscow in the Security Council remains Syria – and here there has been very little movement at the UN in recent months. The lack of progress on UN efforts to create a new constitution-drafting process in Syria, despite heavy Russian engagement, and the appointment of a new envoy to the country (Geir O. Pedersen), have put Security Council discussions of the situation into a sort of limbo. The Council continues to discuss Syria on a regular basis, but without the intensity with which it did at the height of the war. This is partly good news for Russian diplomats, as it means they face less public criticism. But it also leaves them no closer to winning UN support for a settlement in Syria that takes some of the burden of reconstruction off Russia's shoulders.

While China often joins Russia in abstentions, its broader strategy continues to be opaque. Chinese diplomats still tend to be cautious in Security Council negotiations, unless direct national interests are at stake. In some cases, as in recent months on Myanmar, they have refused to engage substantively at all.²⁶ This level of caution contrasts to a marked growth of activism among Chinese diplomats in other UN forums, such as development committees and the Human Rights Council in Geneva. Nonetheless, Beijing is asserting itself in Security Council matters, too, often by applying pressure on other members through their capitals rather than bargaining in New York. For example, through these means, China worked with Russia in December 2018 to persuade other Council members to block a debate on the human rights situation in North Korea.²⁷

²³ Russia may, however, have expected China to join it in this abstention. Crisis Group interview, New York, 15 March 2019.

²⁴ In 2018, China and Russia jointly abstained on resolutions concerning Western Sahara (on the grounds that the U.S. was attempting to dictate terms without sufficient consultation) and Haiti (arguing that it referred unnecessarily to the Council's Chapter VII enforcement powers).

²⁵ In 2006, for example, China and Russia abstained on a resolution to deploy a UN peacekeeping operation to replace African Union (AU) troops in Darfur. The Sudanese government correctly interpreted this as a signal that the Council would not back up the mandate robustly and dragged out negotiations on a compromise UN-AU option into 2007.

²⁶ China's non-engagement on Myanmar followed a successful effort by other Council members (including Britain, France and Germany) to invite the leader of a Human Rights Council fact-finding mission to brief on the plight of the Rohingya. See UN document S/2018/926.

²⁷ "U.S. scraps UN meeting on North Korea human rights", AFP, 8 December 2018.

China also benefits from the fact that the Council's Western members want to avoid developing confrontational relations with it similar to those they have with Russia. The UK, which leads discussions on Myanmar, has avoided pushing the Chinese into a situation where they would veto a resolution on the Rohingya crisis. This April, China came close to a veto when the U.S. and UK tabled a resolution imposing sanctions on Masood Azhar, the leader of Pakistan's Jaish-e-Mohammed militant group (JeM). China has long opposed sanctions against Azhar as a favour to Pakistan, but the British and Americans wanted to flag this issue after JeM claimed responsibility for killing forty Indian paramilitary police in Kashmir in February, sparking a series of Indian-Pakistani clashes.²⁸ In this instance, the Chinese seem to have compromised to save face, persuading the U.S. to drop its resolution but agreeing to discuss sanctions on Azhar further.²⁹

In sum, though China and Russia continue to cooperate on many matters in the Security Council, the two powers have developed quite different relations with the U.S. and the Europeans. While the Russians are locked in a confrontational relationship with the Western powers, China appears to be pursuing mutual accommodation. This can break down – for instance, Chinese diplomats were highly frustrated that other Council members refused to include a positive reference to the Belt and Road Initiative in a recent resolution on Afghanistan – but keeps public spats limited.

Both the Chinese and Russian approaches arguably reduce the effectiveness of the Council. While arguments with Russia can bring UN diplomacy to a sudden halt, China has the ability to draw out talks on a problem like Myanmar indefinitely. It is possible that the U.S. may take a harder line toward China at the UN in future – National Security Advisor Bolton in particular is reportedly worried by Beijing's influence there. For now, however, the main Western members of the Council appear to be more focused on pursuing disputes with each other.

V. Elected Council Members: Second-class Citizens?

The elected members of the council – or E10 – have grown increasingly impatient with the P5's management of UN affairs in recent years. A number of European elected members in particular have recently tried to make the Council more effective and scored a few successes. Sweden, for example, played an important role in engineering the current Yemeni peace effort last year. A nascent "E10 culture" has emerged in recent years, with small and medium-sized countries working together across regional divides to make their presence felt – Kuwaiti diplomats have, for example, become heavily engaged on reforms to the Council's working methods.³⁰

But the P5 still keep the E10's ambitions in check. The U.S. pushback against Germany's resolution on sexual violence in conflict was not an isolated act of spite. When the Netherlands tabled a largely common-sense resolution on improving mandates for peacekeeping operations at the end of last year, Russia and the U.S.

²⁸ Michelle Nichols, "U.S. steps up push for UN to blacklist Kashmir attack leader", Reuters, 27 March 2019.

²⁹ Crisis Group interviews, New York, April 2019.

³⁰ "In hindsight: The emergence of the E10", Security Council Report, 28 September 2018.

squashed the initiative on the grounds that it could tie their hands in future debates over blue helmets.³¹ Poland floated ideas for getting the UN more involved in conflict resolution in Ukraine in 2018, but ran into opposition from France, which worried that this would undermine the Normandy Format.

The current group of elected members also have quite diverse views of multilateralism that mean they struggle to pull together as a group. As observed above, Germany has worked with France to project a strong sense of EU identity and purpose at the UN. But Indonesia and South Africa, which joined the Council at the same time as the Germans this January, have signalled their commitment to a “Southern” agenda, questioning Western initiatives and often taking positions that are closer to China and Russia’s on issues such as Venezuela. On Middle Eastern matters, notably Yemen, Kuwait frequently takes positions close to those of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (meaning that the U.S. does not always need to speak up for its Gulf allies directly). In this context, the elected bloc in the Council is unlikely to be a united force in the near future.

The E10 still have ways to complicate Council business. The African members (or A3, currently comprising Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea and South Africa) have been particularly active this year. In January, South Africa used procedural means to slow down Council discussions of the Democratic Republic of Congo’s disputed elections (countering a push for early talks by France), limiting the UN’s ability to influence events there. South Africa and Equatorial Guinea opposed the Council making a statement on the Sudanese coup. All three African members raised objections to the draft UK resolution on Libya and Haftar in April on the grounds that it did not reflect the views of the African Union (AU).³²

While the A3 do not always work together coherently, their positions on these issues reflect a broader dissatisfaction with the P5’s approach to taking decisions on African issues, and recurrent lack of deference to the AU. These feelings have been magnified by a messy diplomatic battle in the Council in December last year, when the U.S. blocked a resolution floated by the African members (which then included Ethiopia rather than South Africa) calling for the UN to finance AU peace operations. The U.S. threatened to veto because of the draft resolution’s cost implications, leaving all sides raw. Diplomats note that both American and African representatives have been “aggressive” in discussing financing in other UN forums in recent months, and the problem will not be resolved soon.³³

Given the importance of AU-UN cooperation in cases such as Somalia, these diplomatic ruptures potentially have serious consequences for crisis management and counter-terrorism operations on the ground. A forthcoming Crisis Group paper will explore AU-UN relations in more detail, with specific reference to the AU Peace and Security Council and UN Security Council. In the meantime, the question is whether the UN Council can recover some sense of strategic purpose.

³¹ See *Is Christmas Really Over? Improving the Mandating of Peace Operations* (New York: Security Council Report, 2019), pp. 9-10.

³² The African Council members insisted that the Council should adopt language from an AU Peace and Security Council communique on Libya. See AU document PSC/PR.COMM.DCCCXXXIX, adopted at the 839th meeting of the Peace and Security Council, 9 April 2019.

³³ Crisis Group interview, diplomats working on peacekeeping, New York, 27 March 2019.

VI. Conclusion: Reducing Council Tensions

The poor state of the Security Council is ultimately a symptom of the overall poor state of international cooperation, and there are few signs that this will improve soon. It is highly probable that tensions between the U.S. and other major powers over issues such as Israel-Palestine will complicate Council diplomacy in the coming months. Current American efforts to destroy the Iranian nuclear deal – which the Council has tried to avoid discussing in any depth to date – could also create new ruptures in New York. If nuclear talks between the U.S. and DPRK break down, and Pyongyang returns to regular missile testing, there will inevitably be a new spate of debate over sanctions in the Council. It is not guaranteed that China, Russia and the U.S. could collaborate as well on DPRK as they did in 2017. Council members should, therefore, be ready for some bruising debates.

Nonetheless, there are issues where cooperation is still possible. In 2018, following extremely serious differences over Syria in the first half of the year, P5 members recognised that some sort of political process over Yemen could be a point of cooperation. This recognition helped frame the terrain for the launch of the December 2018 Stockholm agreement and ensuing efforts to build a Yemeni peace process, despite the Anglo-American differences noted above. The difficulties of implementing the agreement have turned into a headache for the Council.³⁴ But the fact that the Council got behind the process shows that its members can still identify islands of agreement.

Such points of consensus are likely to involve crises that (i) fall below top-level sources of international division (so not Ukraine or Israel) and (ii) where the P5 have no other clear ways forward. In this context, there are three possible areas for better diplomacy over the coming months:

- **Mali and the Sahel:** Recurrent Franco-American divisions over MINUSMA and the G5 Sahel are deleterious to the Council, and also weaken the international response to the crisis in the region. Rather than enter a new round of disputes over MINUSMA's mandate and budget, France and the U.S. should pause to consider what steps are necessary to stabilise the region. The ingredients, as Crisis Group has argued in previous reports and commentaries, are well-known to diplomats working on this file: (i) focusing on security in central Mali; (ii) ensuring that G5 Sahel and other regional forces adopt a political approach to operations rather than a predominantly military one; and (iii) strengthening state structures and service delivery as fast as feasible across the region.³⁵ French and U.S. officials should work bilaterally to identify a shared approach to these priorities at the UN.³⁶

³⁴ See Crisis Group's series of Yemen updates in the spring of 2019.

³⁵ See Jean-Hervé Jezequel, "Centre de Mali : enrayer la nettoyage ethnique", Crisis Group Q&A, 25 March 2019.

³⁶ As noted in Section III, one obstacle to such a compromise could be that a new focus on central Mali by MINUSMA would most probably mean shifting UN assets from the north of the country. This could in turn complicate French counter-terrorist operations in the north, which partly rely on the UN for logistics and security assistance. The U.S. and France would need to work out a budget-

- **Libya in the wake of the Haftar offensive:** While the Haftar offensive in Libya divided the Council, members need to come back together as quickly as possible to stop the current fighting from morphing into a costly war of attrition that will ultimately benefit no Council member. Again, the basic principles for action (outlined in a Crisis Group statement early in the fighting) are fairly obvious: (i) securing a ceasefire on the basis of forces' current positions; and (ii) working with the parties to recreate conditions for UN-led peace talks that were thrown into disarray by the offensive; and (iii) taking diplomatic steps to limit outside interference in the political process.³⁷ The Council should work on a diplomatic pathway back toward this outcome. It might also take a more serious approach to the UN arms embargo on Libya, which P5 members have largely ignored (or flouted) to advance their interests.
- **“Do no harm” in Venezuela:** The Council's discussions of Venezuela to date have been counterproductive. If the U.S. hoped to use the UN as a mechanism to advance pro-Guaidó cause, this has backfired, as Russia has countered with a strong pro-Maduro push and U.S. allies have grown nervous about the entire agenda. While the final outcome of the Venezuelan crisis is unclear, it is possible that the UN may be needed to step in to help bring the parties back to the table if and when the crisis worsens. In the meantime, Council members including the U.S. and Russia would be well advised to agree on a tacit “do no harm” approach to the crisis at the UN, avoiding using the Council as a platform for public diplomacy. This sort of restraint may increase the chances of the UN playing a constructive role later on.

These are all limited steps to restoring some sense of transactional, cooperative diplomacy in the Council. They are short-term priorities, and do not address broader strategic differences among the P5 and other Council members. Nor are they politically straightforward; each requires P5 members and other powers to compromise on often hard-fought positions. But such limited steps are what the Council needs to get back on track now. Without such progress, it is liable to slip further into dysfunction, unable to make even the most limited statement on the crises of the moment – let alone attempt to solve any of them.

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ary and operational agreement that ensured that a UN shift to central Mali did not weaken French operations, without creating major additional costs.

³⁷ Crisis Group Alert, “Averting a Full-blown War in Libya”, 10 April 2019.



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