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Navigating the Storms at the UN Security Council

Tensions are mounting among the permanent five members of the UN Security Council. After a series of rows over the Middle East, and with further disputes on the horizon, the five should convene a September summit as proposed by France and Russia to contain their differences.

Splits among the five permanent members of the Security Council or P5 (China, France, UK, Russia and the U.S.) on issues from Syria to Venezuela are now a regular and frustrating feature of UN diplomacy. Nevertheless, meeting at a Holocaust commemoration in Israel last month, French President Emmanuel Macron and his Russian counterpart Vladimir Putin reportedly discussed convening a leader-level meeting of the five at this September's UN General Assembly session. Does this initiative suggest that relations among the P5 are about to take a turn for the better?

Perhaps marginally, but the outlook for Council relations remains fairly bleak. Looking at the Council's agenda for the next several months, there are reasons to believe that the P5 face a factious 2020, risking more divisions over crisis situations from Mali to North Korea, and above all the tangle of conflicts in the Middle East. That said, putting a summit on the calendar for September – if only as a symbolic reminder of the P5's role in founding the UN 75 years ago – could create a modest incentive to ease their differences.

A Time of Tensions

P5 cooperation at the UN is both close and, in many cases, dysfunctional. The five retain a tight grip on most major Council processes, drafting resolutions and only intermittently permitting the ten elected Council members a substantive role. By most accounts, personal relations among P5 representatives are mostly decent behind the scenes despite their public differences. While arguments over the Syrian war poisoned intra-P5 relations through the last decade, and continue intermittently, the generation of diplomats involved in the most vicious disputes – such as that over the fall of Aleppo in 2016 – has now largely moved on from New York. Some P5 members suggest that, leaving the Syria conflict aside, the overall state of Council diplomacy is not quite as bad as UN critics like to claim.

This view holds up only if one focuses on the Council's negotiations on issues like peacekeeping in Africa, which only rarely inspire serious P5 rifts. But a brief survey of Council diplomacy on non-African issues – and even more contentious African questions – belies the assertion that P5 relations are broadly all right. For example, after a series of clashes among the U.S., Russia and China over the crisis in Venezuela in early 2019, the Council has stopped discussing the topic altogether. Another source of friction is that U.S. and European members of the Council have – as we noted in November – started questioning China's treatment of the Uighur minority in Council consultations, sometimes catching the Chinese off guard. They surprised Beijing's delegation in mid-January,

General view is seen during the UN Security Council meeting at the UN headquarters in New York, U.S. on December 20, 2019. Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu Agency

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for instance, by raising the Uighur subject in a discussion of UN conflict prevention in Central Asia. For its part, China has pushed for Council talks on India's policies in Kashmir, even though the rest of the P5, including Russia, oppose any UN pressure on Delhi.

Nonetheless, the most serious disputes among the P5 centre on the Middle East and North Africa. Over the last two months, the five have sparred repeatedly over humanitarian aid to Syria, the U.S. killing of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in Iraq, and the war in Libya.

The latest Syrian dispute focused on the Council's mandate – initially passed in 2014 – for UN bodies to deliver humanitarian assistance across the borders of neighbouring countries to areas of Syria outside government control, without Damascus's permission. Russia has frequently queried if cross-border assistance is still necessary, and threatened to veto its continuation in 2017. Last December, Moscow called for the closure of two of the four crossing points that previous resolutions authorised aid agencies to use, and China joined it in vetoing a compromise text prepared by Belgium, Germany and Kuwait that aimed to keep three of the crossings open. In last-minute haggling in January, Russia got most of what it wanted, as the Council agreed to mandate just two crossing points for six months. In a curious climax to the argument, China and Russia abstained on the resolution (arguing that it said too little about Syria's sovereignty) and the UK and U.S. did so, too (because they thought it was too weak). France, having tried to act as a conciliator with Russia during the dispute, was left as the one P5 member to vote in favour.

January's turmoil in Iraq also highlighted differences among the P5, creating tensions not only between the Western and non-Western members of the group, but also among the U.S. and its allies. After the U.S. killed Soleimani in Iraq on 3 January, China and Russia signalled their displeasure by refusing to sign off

on a routine condemnation of Iraqi protesters' attack on the U.S. embassy in Baghdad the previous week. (Normally, the one thing diplomats in New York can agree on under any circumstances is that it is unacceptable to attack diplomats.)

Moreover, the episode resulted in a behind-the-scenes split between France and the UK, which some European officials fear could presage more serious divisions in the post-Brexit era. When France proposed that the Council hold closed talks on regional de-escalation after the Soleimani affair, the British – presumably wishing to avoid any implication that they were critical of Washington – refused to join other European members of the Council in calling for these consultations. Paris backed off. Although the UK worked collegially with France and other EU Council members after the 2016 Brexit referendum (increasing, as we observed last year, the number of E3 statements with France and Germany at the UN on issues including Iran), European officials fret that it will now start to tilt toward Washington more frequently.

The situation in Libya, a perennial source of Council tensions since 2011, also fuelled P5 bickering in January. While Germany engineered an ostensibly successful summit in Berlin on the country in the middle of the month – with participants from all P5 countries including Presidents Macron and Putin agreeing to respect the UN arms embargo and support a ceasefire – UN discussions on how to follow up on the conference quickly derailed. Germany called for the Council to pass a short resolution endorsing the Berlin conference conclusions, but other P5 members requested a text more focused on the situation on the ground, with the U.S. specifically pushing for the resolution to condemn Russian private military contractors operating in Libya, and Moscow predictably refusing to accept such wording. At the time of writing, the Council appears to be edging toward some sort of compromise text (with only vague language on the military contractor question), although Russia has questioned whether the Council should endorse the Berlin outcome at all unless Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar – who is both head of the Libyan National Army, which dominates eastern Libya, and Moscow's ally – confirms his support for it. As outside powers have continued to breach the arms embargo, and some observers think a new escalation of fighting is likely, it is hard not to conclude that the Security Council missed the opportunity to make the most of the Berlin meeting by offering rapid and firm backing for a ceasefire.

Council members also see the prospect of more diplomatic storms over the Middle East that could divide the P5 this year. President Donald Trump's long-delayed announcement of his Israeli-Palestinian peace plan at the end of January, featuring a highly imbalanced version of what he misleadingly labels a two-state solution, can hardly be expected to serve as the foundation for cooperative work in New York. In quick succession, the plan's author Jared Kushner will brief a closed meeting of the Council on 6 February, and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas will visit the UN early next week to condemn the U.S. approach. Tunisia, the only Arab state on the Council at present, is working on a resolution that is likely to reaffirm past Security Council resolutions on the two-state solution as a basis for talks and implicitly dismiss the American effort – a text which the U.S. would surely veto. Nevertheless, and although British and French diplomats would probably prefer not to have to vote on the issue, as the dispute is liable to do little more than illustrate the Council's diminished importance for Middle East peacemaking, a showdown seems almost inevitable. A showdown could also be coming to the General Assembly – where the U.S. both lacks a veto and traditionally finds itself in a distinct minority on Israeli-Palestinian issues.

The most serious flashpoint for the P5 is, however, Iran. The E3's decision in January to call out Iranian breaches of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in retaliation for U.S. abrogation of the deal in 2018, initiating the agreement's dispute resolution mechanism and opening a pathway for the potential

restoration of UN sanctions against Tehran, pleased Washington. Under the JCPOA, any single participant in the deal can snap back sanctions without the possibility of a veto. Two overlapping questions loom: first, whether the U.S. has the legal authority to trigger the snapback, given that it no longer is a JCPOA participant and, secondly, whether Russia and China would respect any reimposition, whether triggered by the U.S. or a European country. As Crisis Group noted in a recent report: "Russia and China have suggested that they would not recognise any reimposition of UN sanctions, arguing that the basis for the existence of sanctions – ie, ensuring the purely civilian nature of Iran's nuclear program – was removed with the signing of the JCPOA". Restoring UN sanctions would likely lead to the JCPOA's collapse, and possibly Iran's withdrawal from the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Of particular import to the U.S. is the future of the UN conventional arms embargo on Iran, which under the terms of the JCPOA is set to lapse in October, unless sanctions are reimposed. If UN sanctions are not reimposed through the JCPOA mechanism, Council diplomats speculate that Washington may table a fresh resolution extending the embargo this summer. Such a text would almost certainly run into a Chinese and Russian veto, which depending on the timing could overshadow a P5 leaders' summit in September.

And More to Come

If Iran seems to be the source of at least one possible breakdown in New York among the P5 between now and the celebration of the UN's 75th anniversary at the General Assembly session in September, a number of other crises could exacerbate their tensions.

Syria could rear its head again as the Council will have to discuss humanitarian assistance in July – when the latest mandate for cross-border deliveries will lapse – potentially repeating the recent fight over the issue. UN officials expect Russia to once again take a tough line.

North Korea, a topic that brought the U.S. and China together in 2017 – when they agreed on far-reaching sanctions – could become a source of division going forward. China and Russia set the stage for arguments over UN sanctions in December by tabling a resolution calling for partial sanctions relief. The Europeans and U.S. have rejected this idea. It is possible that Beijing and Moscow tabled their text as a way of signalling Pyongyang (which had been publicly threatening to give the U.S. an unwelcome "Christmas gift" over the holidays) that they would support easing sanctions so long as North Korea did not resume major missile tests or nuclear testing. Whatever the motive, Western diplomats and UN officials worry that the P5 are drifting apart on how to deal with Kim Jong-un. If tensions on the Korean peninsula increase again, it is far from certain that the P5 will agree on a cohesive response.

In Africa, Mali and South Sudan could cause the P5 some trouble. France and the U.S. are trapped in a recurrent debate over the size and mandate of the UN Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA). This mission has struggled to deal with jihadist threats, but Paris believes it is still important to regional security, not least because it provides logistical support to French-led counter-terrorism operations. Earlier this month, the U.S. said it wants to see significant cuts to the 15,000-strong force and "an alternative approach" to stabilisation by June – though it did not make clear precisely what this alternative might involve – when the MINUSMA mandate expires. France, in this case supported by Russia, signalled that it sees no need for major changes. Paris and Washington clashed over MINUSMA last year but managed to paper over their differences to get a resolution, and they are unlikely to risk a full-scale falling-out over the issue in 2020. Nonetheless, with

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France already criticising U.S. plans to reduce its own military footprint in the Sahel, these discussions could be difficult.

In South Sudan, the Security Council as a whole is frustrated by the failure of President Salva Kiir and his long-time rival Riek Machar to form a unity government, despite repeated calls from the UN to do so. But while the U.S. appears inclined to impose new sanctions on political leaders in Juba if there is no deal soon, China and Russia are likely to be sceptical. Beijing, deeply invested in South Sudan's oil sector, has called for easing sanctions in the past, while Moscow has accused the U.S. of a heavy-handed approach to Juba. Bolstering these arguments, African members of the Security Council have also questioned the value of sanctions in this context. Beijing and Moscow could also push to block the renewal of a Security Council arms embargo on Juba this summer. Both debates would represent personal tests for U.S. Ambassador to the UN Kelly Craft, who led a Council visit to Juba in October, and like her predecessor, Nikki Haley, favours a tough approach there.

Making the Most of a Fall Meeting

With so many tensions on the horizon, it is not clear that a P5 leaders' summit in September can do much to resolve the Security Council's problems, and there is a risk that France and Russia could engineer a gathering that falls apart if a major crisis erupts, such as when President Trump cancelled a meeting with President Putin at the 2018 G20 summit over tensions in Ukraine. Yet the P5 leaders would still be wise to make at least a symbolic effort to show that they are open to cooperation.

For all their differences, the five have a vested interest in standing up for the Council's authority over crises of common concern, and perhaps even more than that their privileged position in directing its decision-making. Against this backdrop, it could do at least a bit of good for P5 leaders to meet and make a joint announcement of their continued commitment to cooperation, even if it rings a little hollow. If the P5 do not offer some sort of signal that they take seriously their responsibility to work through the UN, other states will look even less to the Council for leadership, and its ability to forge collective responses to peace and security challenges will continue to slip. Even if the P5 foresee their relations deteriorating further this year and beyond, they can at least acknowledge that the Security Council remains a channel for addressing some crises, addressing some differences and pursuing shared interests.