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BURSTING THE UN BUBBLE: HOW TO COUNTER RUSSIA IN THE SECURITY COUNCIL

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SUMMARY

- Europeans want the UN to manage peace processes and save lives in the Middle East and sub-Saharan Africa. But Russia and China have used their vetoes to stop the UN intervening effectively in Syria, and Moscow has sidelined it over Ukraine.
- Despite these vetoes, Russia does not want to paralyse the UN completely. It prefers to entangle the US and European powers in drawn-out diplomatic bargaining in the Security Council, limiting their freedom of manoeuvre and affirming Moscow's global status. China sometimes disapproves of Russia's tactics, but is often surprisingly passive.
- Western diplomats are frequently divided over whether to confront or accommodate Russia in the Security Council, but the EU will forfeit its liberal goals if it gives way too much.
- While Britain and France defend their privileges as permanent members of the Security Council, Europe's overall leverage is weakened by the fact that Germany plays a relatively minor role at the UN. If Berlin were more involved, it might push Beijing and Moscow to be more cooperative.
- The Iran nuclear talks, where Germany is an equal with France and the UK in the E3+3 format, and the EU also has a formal role, offer a model for more effective European engagement in big power diplomacy around the UN.

Will rising great power competition paralyse the United Nations? Or can the UN act as a mechanism of last resort for Europe and the US to resolve global crises in cooperation with Russia and China? After four years of debate and deadlock over Syria, the Security Council does not immediately look like a promising venue for solving problems with Beijing and Moscow. The UN has played a very marginal role in the Ukrainian dispute, largely offering Russia and the West a public platform to trade accusations rather than acting as a conduit for meaningful diplomacy. Under these circumstances, European and American policymakers might be expected to back away from the UN, just as they did following the Balkan wars in the mid-1990s.

The reverse is happening. Rather than give up on the UN, EU members and the US have doubled down on their political investment in the organisation. Despite multiple setbacks, they have persisted in their attempts to work with Moscow over Syria, setting up a series of UN envoys to lead ill-fated talks on the conflict in Geneva. European powers have also left the daunting task of mediating in Libya and Yemen to the UN. Frustrated by its EU allies' refusal to offer large-scale military assistance in ex-colonies such as Mali and the Central African Republic (CAR), Paris has gone back to the Security Council to drum up blue-helmet peacekeeping forces. The nuclear deal currently under negotiation with Iran will – if confirmed – give the Security Council a pivotal role in assessing Tehran's compliance. Grappling with the migrant crisis in the Mediterranean, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini has shuttled between Brussels and New York looking for a UN endorsement of military action against people-smugglers.

There are multiple reasons for continued European and US efforts to work through the UN. The EU's member states are instinctively committed to "effective multilateralism", as they noted in the 2003 European Security Strategy, and US President Barack Obama has a similar philosophical inclination towards international cooperation. Perhaps equally importantly, policymakers in European capitals and Washington are profoundly conscious that their military and political resources are limited. The UN often provides a relatively low-cost mechanism for dealing with a growing wave of crises.

On some measures, too, working through the UN still often pays off. As one cautiously optimistic recent study observes, "in 2014, the Council adopted 63 resolutions, 60 of which unanimously, including 32 resolutions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter (which allows for enforcement action)".¹ The sheer number of resolutions passed is not necessarily a sign that the UN is effective – many involve compromises with China and Russia that inevitably blunt their impact. But France and the UK still draft the vast majority of these resolutions: more often than not, the UN serves a solidly Western agenda.

In addition to the substantive value of these resolutions, many people argue that the Security Council also serves a purpose as a channel for continued cooperation with Moscow at a time when other elements of the post-Cold War framework have broken down. Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi has, for example, aimed to involve Russia in constructing a UN deal over Libya, arguing that "if Russia returns to the international table, we will all be more at ease".² When Mogherini circulated a paper on re-engaging Russia this January, it emphasised potential areas for dialogue tied to the UN, including Libya, the Middle East Peace Process, and Iran and North Korea's nuclear programmes.³ For their part, Russia and China have hinted that they are open to such rapprochement; for example, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said this February that it might be possible to find new areas for cooperation, such as countering violent extremism.

Nevertheless, this paper argues, the EU must recognise that its efforts to pursue its interests through the UN risk backfiring. Instead of seeking to find viable solutions to international crises, Moscow has more often succeeded in entangling the US and Europe in a series of diplomatic games over Syria and Ukraine, while Beijing has been largely passive. Even if the US, France, and Britain often get their way at the UN, this is primarily on secondary issues where Russia and China have little at stake.

In the meantime, Arab and African governments are increasingly treating the Security Council as an irrelevance. If European powers want to preserve the UN as a credible forum for addressing global security threats and managing great power relations, they must ensure that they do not

let Russia set the terms for handling future crises. Giving Moscow the initiative also gives it the opportunity to undermine the liberal principles – from humanitarian norms to the Responsibility to Protect – that European policymakers have struggled for years to embed in the UN.

Against a background of great power confrontation, there are obviously limits to what the EU and US can do to reverse these trends. Nevertheless, one way to counteract them, this paper suggests, is to reconnect European diplomacy inside the UN bubble with the reality of power dynamics in the world outside, by bringing the EU's top power, Germany, into closer coordination with its two permanent Security Council members, France and the UK. If it is possible to strike a nuclear deal with Iran, a process that Germany has been closely involved in, this could open a window for a broader settling of accounts with Russia and China in the UN.

The Russification of the UN

Whenever Russia or China cast a veto in the Security Council – as they have now done four times over Syria and once over Ukraine – there is a surge of commentary about their plans to paralyse the UN. This is doubly misleading. Beijing and Moscow use their vetoes sparingly, and it is not usually in their interest to bring UN diplomacy to a grinding halt. In major crises, their priority is often to keep their Western counterparts locked into some sort of UN process as a means to constrain them. A soft strategy of entangling the US and Europe in open-ended negotiations, dragging on for months or years, is much more effective than outright confrontation.

Moscow and Beijing learned this lesson in 1999 and in 2003, when their threats to veto resolutions authorising military action in Kosovo and Iraq, respectively, failed to change American calculations. When the US belatedly pushed for the Security Council to authorise the Libyan campaign in 2011, Chinese and Russian officials may have calculated that there was little point in risking another diplomatic humiliation. Had they vetoed the American proposals, Obama and his allies might well have intervened anyway, if only to avoid accusations of weakness. In refraining from casting a veto, Beijing and Moscow may have hoped to gain leverage over the NATO campaign and post-conflict settlement. Perhaps unwisely, NATO denied them this, putting together a "Friends of Libya" group to oversee the campaign at arms-length from the UN while stretching its Security Council mandate to breaking point by attacking Muammar Gaddafi's forces until they could no longer defend his hold on power.

Russia has repeatedly cited NATO's behaviour in Libya as proof of European and American bad faith at the UN. President Vladimir Putin has dismissed the Security Council resolution authorising action to protect civilians as a "medieval call for crusades".⁴ These charges resonate strongly with non-Western diplomats, especially now that Libya has come apart, and many US and European officials privately admit that they did manipulate their

¹ Sebastian von Einsiedel, David M. Malone, and Bruno Stagno Ugarte, "The UN Security Council in an Age of Great Power Rivalry", United Nations University Working Paper Series, No. 4, February 2015, available at http://i.unu.edu/media/cpr.unu.edu/post/826/WPo4_UNSCAgeofPowerRivalry.pdf.

² "Renzi seeks key role for Russia in Libya crisis", *Agence France-Presse*, 6 March 2015, available at <http://www.thelocal.it/20150306/renzi-seeks-key-role-for-russia-in-libya-crisis>.

³ "Issues paper on relations with Russia", for Foreign Affairs Council, 19 January 2015, available at <http://blogs.ft.com/brusselsblog/files/2015/01/Russia.pdf>.

⁴ Gleb Bryanski, "Putin likens UN Libya resolution to crusades", *Reuters*, 21 March 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/21/us-libya-russia-idUSTR72K3JR20110321>.

UN mandate. Whatever other factors have driven Russian policy since 2011, Putin has clearly set out to compensate for Moscow's blunder over Libya.

In the Syrian and Ukrainian crises, by contrast, Russia has used a sharper mix of aggressive and conciliatory diplomatic tactics to restrain the West, with China largely following Moscow's lead. The veto remains the basis of Russia's power at the UN. But Russia's preferred tactics involve (i) entangling the West in fragile peace initiatives that have little genuine chance of success and rely on Moscow's goodwill; (ii) dispensing more-or-less illusory concessions on minor issues to appear constructive; and (iii) sending dark signals that, unless it is listened to, it may go on a diplomatic rampage and start blocking Western proposals far more brutally.

Russian diplomats are extremely good at turning the Security Council's rules to their advantage. They use gambits such as floating draft resolutions that have little chance of success to muddy debates and keep their Western counterparts off-balance. This also allows other members of the Council to avoid taking clear positions on contentious issues. The Russians are adept at ferreting out examples of Western hypocrisy: in May 2015, Moscow nearly torpedoed an anodyne Security Council resolution on small-arms trafficking by tying it to US and European support for the Syrian rebels. Much of this activity is purely tactical or aimed at making symbolic political points: since the West slapped sanctions on Russia over Ukraine, it has routinely tried to complicate other sanctions regimes at the UN. If this is largely petty posturing, Moscow can raise its game when its interests are at stake.

Syria: The mediation game

Russia has played this game superbly over Syria. Stung by NATO's behaviour over Libya, it originally seemed willing to adopt a strategy of all-out confrontation. When UN officials first raised the alarm about the Assad regime's suppression of popular protests in April 2011, Russia argued that the Security Council should not engage with the initial bout of protests in Syria at all.⁵ American officials appeared wary about initiating a fight over the issue, guessing that Russia would not compromise, but Britain and France insisted on addressing the expanding conflict through the Council.⁶ In October 2011, Russia and China vetoed a mild British resolution calling on Damascus to step back from violence, and then blocked far harder proposals for President Bashar al-Assad's removal backed by the Arab League in February 2012.

This second veto thrust the UN into turmoil, as Saudi Arabia corralled two-thirds of the General Assembly into supporting a resolution criticising the Security Council. Russia changed tack, blessing UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's appointment of Kofi Annan as the UN–Arab League Joint Special Envoy for Syria, and then manoeuvred to ensure that Annan presented no threat to Assad. Moscow knew that it had one major advantage: the Obama administration

⁵ For a more detailed account of the first phase on UN diplomacy over Syria, see "Syria" by Richard Gowan and Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, in Jared Genser and Bruno Stagno Ugarte (eds), *The United Nations Security Council in the Age of Human Rights* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), pp. 380–395.

⁶ On US–European splits, see Colum Lynch, "Syrian Shadow Boxing", *Foreign Policy*, 3 August 2012, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/08/03/syrian-shadow-boxing/>.

had no desire to stumble into a new war in the Middle East. American, European, and Russian diplomats were unable to agree on a way forward but, as Annan's deputy Jean-Marie Guéhenno notes, "neither Russia nor the United States wanted a dramatic failure of the political process, which would expose the limits of their policies and might force them to consider alternative policies. Both had an interest in keeping the mediation show going."⁷

Annan's efforts culminated in the negotiation of a framework agreement on the terms for a Syrian transition in Geneva in June 2012, but the US and Russia immediately fell out over its terms. Annan's process unravelled as Russia and China vetoed a further Western resolution demanding that Assad cease military operations, and he resigned soon afterwards. But his efforts to bring Moscow and the US together had set a pattern that has dominated UN peacemaking efforts ever since.

This pattern has had three main features. Firstly, Russia has smartly recognised and exploited US weaknesses over the war. Secondly, it has proved remarkably skilful at finding elaborate diplomatic formulas to address these weaknesses while simultaneously enhancing its own leverage. Thirdly, by focusing on deal-making with Washington, it has incrementally marginalised France and the UK in the crisis.

In May 2013, when evidence of the Syrian regime's use of chemical weapons against civilians was creating pressure for Western intervention, Russia and the US agreed to hold a new round of UN talks in Geneva. As the starting date for the talks was repeatedly pushed back, the Obama administration faced an even greater crisis after a Syrian sarin attack in Ghouta in August 2013 claimed over 1,000 lives. While Obama and his European allies equivocated over air strikes, Putin gave them a way out by proposing a joint effort to dismantle Syria's chemical arsenal under a UN mandate. "This was a brilliant tactical move on the part of Russia," Guéhenno observes, "which relieved the pressure on its ally Assad and allowed the Security Council to regain its unity [on Syria] for the first time since . . . April 2012."⁸

Yet it was an offer with a high price tag. Washington's decision to support the proposal immediately removed whatever small leverage it might have wielded over Damascus. It also consolidated Moscow's influence over the conflict, as Russian and Chinese personnel played a central role in the resulting operation within Syria. By contrast, European officials emerged from the crisis badly bruised. US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov negotiated the resolution that resolved the crisis bilaterally in Geneva. Even Britain and France were cut out. Paris floated an alternative resolution that would have placed greater pressure on Damascus to implement the deal, but Russia insisted on a weaker text. (French officials argue that their intervention helped harden the US position a little.)

This incident was indicative of deeper transatlantic tensions at the UN. American officials had been willing to let their European counterparts take the lead on Syria in late 2011

⁷ Jean-Marie Guéhenno, *The Fog of Peace: A Memoir of International Peacekeeping in the 21st Century* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2015), p. 281 (hereafter, Guéhenno, *The Fog of Peace*).

⁸ Guéhenno, *The Fog of Peace*, p. 285.

and 2012. But, as the crisis intensified, the US increasingly prioritised its relations with Russia over its allies' concerns. Both before and after the chemical weapons crisis, these differences centred on proposals – backed by all EU members except Sweden and championed by France in the Security Council – to refer Syria to the International Criminal Court (ICC). The US steadfastly opposed these initiatives, claiming throughout 2013 that they would undermine its broader peacemaking efforts. It only changed its position in the second quarter of 2014, for two reasons. Firstly, UN envoy Lakhdar Brahimi convened the long-delayed second set of Geneva talks, and these imploded almost immediately. Assad's representatives treated the process with contempt, suggesting that Russia had been unable or unwilling to do more than bring them to the table. Secondly, Moscow had seized Crimea. As Washington looked for ways to show its irritation, France took the opportunity to put its ICC resolution to the Security Council in May. Russia and China duly killed it.

But despite the Ukrainian crisis and the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIS) as a new threat in Syria, the basic pattern of UN peacemaking over Syria has remained constant. Russia and the US continue to parlay over a peace deal, but Moscow opposes any serious move to increase the diplomatic pressure on Assad. Britain and France have little choice but to support the process, even if they are sceptical about its chances of success (as are many UN officials, who believe it to be hollow). Russia has, however, distracted the West through a new gambit: making small concessions on secondary issues over Syria in order to deflect attention from its failure to shift its baseline position.

These concessions have included agreeing to two resolutions crafted by Luxembourg and Australia calling for greater humanitarian access into Syria – the second authorised aid deliveries without the consent of the regime.⁹ Luxembourg deserves some credit for driving this agenda, but the resolutions have had little impact on the ground. This year, Russia has signed on to a resolution condemning the apparent use of chlorine gas in Syria, which most observers attribute to Assad's supporters, and tabled a useful resolution on cutting off funding to ISIS.

Some critics of the West's handling of Syria argue that Russia's role in the war is exaggerated or unfairly maligned. As Guéhenno concludes, those who blame Moscow for Syria's demise fail to see that "the future of the Middle East will be determined first and foremost by the people of the Middle East, not by Americans, Russians, or Europeans".¹⁰ Even so, Russia is still guilty of entangling the US and Europeans in complex and prolonged UN diplomatic processes that have, at a minimum, acted as a distraction from more effective diplomatic alternatives.

Russia's performance at the UN over Syria may ultimately come to be seen as a gigantic conjuring trick. Moscow used a conflict over which it has little real control to gain diplomatic leverage over the US, sideline European powers, and renew its status within the Security Council

⁹ For details of these negotiations, see Richard Gowan, "Australia in the UN Security Council", the Lowy Institute for International Policy, 12 June 2014, available at <http://www.loyyinstitute.org/publications/australia-un-security-council>.

¹⁰ Guéhenno, *The Fog of Peace*, p. 288.

after Libya. It has been a masterpiece of gamesmanship. In the Ukrainian case, by contrast, Russia has used its diplomatic skills to defend and legitimise its attack on another sovereign state.

Ukraine: Offering the West an "off ramp"?

When the Ukrainian crisis escalated in early 2014, nobody believed that the Security Council would be able to resolve it. Russia has marginalised the UN in many previous conflicts in which it has been directly involved, ranging from the 1956 invasion of Hungary to the 2008 war in Georgia. But while Moscow could block any Security Council action over Ukraine, Western diplomats hoped that it might want to use the UN as an "off ramp" out of the escalating conflict. A photographer snapped a British position on the emerging crisis that suggested that Ban Ki-moon could create a "special forum" to address the crisis and UN observers could deploy to Ukraine.¹¹

In reality, the UN secretariat's initial efforts to resolve the crisis verged on the farcical. A temporary envoy was briefly held hostage by Crimean separatists. The Western members of the Security Council proceeded to launch a series of very public attacks on Russia's behaviour: the French ambassador drew parallels between the Russian intervention in Crimea and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968.¹² Yet behind these hot words, to which Russian diplomats responded in kind, the US and Europeans hinted that they remained open to a compromise through the UN.

The subtlest of these hints came in March 2014, when the Western members of the Council tabled a resolution declaring the upcoming Russian-engineered referendum on Crimea's status to be invalid. Russia vetoed this. This was hardly a surprise politically, but some UN experts pointed out that in legal terms Moscow was on weak ground: the UN Charter prohibits Security Council members voting on measures relating to the peaceful settlement of disputes to which they are a party.¹³ Had the US, Britain, or France pressed this point they could at least have embarrassed the Russian team at the UN. They did not do so, signalling that they did not want a total breakdown in relations over Ukraine (and perhaps keeping in mind the danger of establishing a precedent that could later be used to stop them voting on their own vital interests).

This concession did not lead anywhere. Security Council debates on Ukraine were frequent and fruitless through 2014, except in the aftermath of the destruction of Malaysia Airlines Flight MH17 in July, when Moscow agreed to allow an international investigation in the face of public outrage.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Russia did not change its overall strategy, and was soon back on the offensive in eastern Ukraine. Moscow

¹¹ Nick Robinson, "Ukraine: UK rules out Russia trade curbs?", BBC News, 3 March 2014, available at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-26426969>.

¹² Statement by Mr Gérard Araud, Permanent Representative of France to the United Nations (UN translation), 3 March 2014, available at <http://www.franceonu.org/3-March-2014-Security-Council>.

¹³ See "In Hindsight: Obligatory Abstentions", Security Council Report, April 2014 Monthly Forecast, 31 March 2014, available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2014-04/in_hindsight_obligatory_abstentions.php.

¹⁴ For a detailed account of diplomacy over MH17, see Nick Bryant, "MH17: The Australians get their resolution", the Interpreter, 22 July 2014, available at <http://www.loyyinterpreter.org/post/2014/07/22/MH17-Australia-united-nations-resolution.aspx?COLLCC=3866398866&>.

has also shrugged off reports by UN human rights officials on abuses in Crimea, and succeeded in persuading many non-Western diplomats to see the crisis in its terms, highlighting America's supposed role in fomenting the uprising in Kyiv.

Russia has also hinted that differences at the UN could spill over into cooperation on other UN issues. Early in the conflict, Moscow suggested that it might link the crisis to its talks with Iran, playing on the Obama administration's greatest diplomatic vulnerability. It has also found ways to worry the EU. In November, it abstained on (but did not veto) a regular resolution reauthorising the European Force in Bosnia and Herzegovina (EUFOR ALTHEA) on the grounds that "this could be viewed as a tool for accelerating the country's integration into the European Union and NATO".¹⁵ Moscow had not objected to ALTHEA's renewal since its inception, and this small gesture struck European diplomats as a worrying signal that Russia could use its leverage at the UN to stir up further troubles in the Balkans linked to Ukraine.

But if Russia has been able to use minor concessions and coded threats to shape debates over Ukraine at the UN, its underlying goal has once again been to draw the West into a political process over the conflict on its terms. It made its first play in this direction in September 2014, after the agreement of the first Minsk Protocol calling for a ceasefire in eastern Ukraine. Russia suggested that the Security Council should endorse this protocol during the annual gathering of world leaders at the UN General Assembly in late September. Suspecting that Moscow planned to lock them into a bad deal, the US, Britain, and France refused to sign on to this plan.

In February of this year, however, Russia got its way. After German Chancellor Angela Merkel and French President François Hollande cobbled together the "Minsk II" agreement to halt the renewed escalation in fighting in eastern Ukraine, Moscow insisted that the Security Council should endorse the text. While the US and UK in particular had qualms about the idea, Moscow held firm to the demand for a resolution. Although the Western powers ensured the resolution referred to Ukraine's territorial integrity, Russia's success nevertheless showed that it could dictate terms over Ukraine in the Security Council, legitimising its claim to be an arbiter in a conflict it has created.

This achievement set a precedent for further dealings over Ukraine at the UN. Although a final resolution to the conflict appears distant, it may well need to be embedded in a bargain at the Security Council. Despite Russia's predominance at the UN, Kyiv has repeatedly suggested the deployment of a blue-helmet peacekeeping force to eastern Ukraine. Unless Russia experiences truly spectacular reverses on the battlefield, however, Moscow will be able to set the terms of a final settlement. Ironically, it may be the Western powers rather than Russia which end up using the UN as an "off ramp" out of the crisis, through a resolution that allows them to present Russia's terms as a collective decision.

China: An absent power at the UN?

If Western diplomats sometimes struggle to keep up with Russia's tactics at the Security Council, China's overall strategy at the UN remains somewhat mysterious. While Beijing insists that it is committed to the organisation, it has refrained from making its full weight felt in New York. Over the last decade, China has deployed a growing number of high-quality diplomats to the UN, in contrast to the stolid old-school officials of years past. British and French officials say that, on the occasions when they are aligned with Beijing in their approach to a common problem, their Chinese counterparts' ruthless pursuit of their goals is a joy to behold. But these moments are few. China mainly opts to take a low profile and stay close to Russia.

The Chinese and Russian delegations typically work out their positions together, and Russia bears the brunt of tough negotiations with the three Western permanent members of the Security Council (P3). Western diplomats say that once the Russians have delivered their position on a sensitive issue, such as a Syria resolution, their Chinese counterparts often follow through with identical talking points a few hours later. The exact balance of power between the Chinese and Russian missions is a source of speculation. Some observers believe that China is much more demanding behind the scenes than in front of the P3, effectively using Russia as a proxy. Others think that China is more passive. Public insights into the relationship are rare: at one point in 2012, the Chinese ambassador is said to have pulled his Russian counterpart out of a sensitive meeting on Syria to call for moderation. But the issue involved was minor, and the moment of tension fleeting.

Despite this opacity, European diplomats and their US counterparts cling to the hope that they can split China and Russia at the UN, at least on a case-by-case basis. Beijing is at least increasingly open about its interests at the UN, such as protecting its energy investments in the two Sudans, and it has worked closely with the West on issues such as Darfur and Mali. It has also gradually expanded its deployments in UN peacekeeping missions, sending its first full infantry battalion to South Sudan.

Early in the Syrian crisis, it was common to hear P3 officials predict that Beijing would eventually step back from Russia's hardcore support for Damascus to avoid offending its major energy suppliers in the Gulf. But while China floated two exceptionally thin peace plans for Syria, it did not make any decisive shift. Similarly, many Western officials hoped that Russia's annexation of Crimea would alienate Beijing. China abstained on the Security Council and General Assembly resolutions concerning Crimea, but went no further. Some diplomats conclude that Beijing has decided that it needs Russian support to limit Western pressure on Iran (another of its major energy suppliers) and will not do anything that endangers this. Chinese scholars argue that cooperation is more deep-seated, reflecting a fundamental commitment

¹⁵ Statement by Vladimir Churkin, reproduced in UN document S/PV.7307, 11 November 2014, available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_pv_7307.pdf.

to constraining the West.¹⁶ Other analysts have concluded that Beijing simply doesn't care about the UN enough to risk a problematic split with Moscow.

Beijing's primary goal at the UN often appears to be keeping the organisation out of its own affairs. In this, it has a tacit partner in the US and indeed most Asian nations, which also want to exclude the UN from their region (while there has been some progress on building a UN-ASEAN relationship, for example, it has been both slow and slight). Beijing insists on dealing with the

¹⁶ François Godement, "Will China cooperate with the West in resolving global crises?", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2 December 2014, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/article/commentary_will_china_cooperate_with_the_west_in_resolving_global_crises.

Grumblers and rebels: IBSA, the Arab League, and the African Union

While the US, France, and the UK grapple with Russia and China in the Security Council, a growing number of large and medium-sized powers view their interactions with contempt. This includes rising powers – notably India, Brazil, and South Africa (IBSA) – who want greater power within the UN, and Arab and African countries, from Saudi Arabia to Uganda, who aim to limit the UN's leverage in their regions.

In 2008, ECFR argued that Brazil and India represented "alienated" powers at the UN.¹ Cut out of major decision-making in the organisation, they seemed likely to drift away from it unless offered a new deal. Brasilia and New Delhi have pushed for permanent seats on the Security Council (in tandem with Berlin and Tokyo) but made little progress. India has significantly limited its contributions to UN peace operations and acted as a spoiler in debates on the UN's development agenda. Brazil has adopted similar tactics, although not always as stridently. But the two powers' efforts to show that they are ready to lead on security issues at the UN have backfired. In 2010, the US quashed a Brazilian-Turkish attempt to resolve the Iranian nuclear impasse. In 2011, the IBSA countries launched an effort to settle the escalating Syrian crisis through the Security Council that soon ran out of steam.

Arab powers have turned against the UN in an increasingly vicious way as the Syrian war has dragged on. The Arab revolutions of 2011 initially looked like an opportunity for the UN, as Ban Ki-moon spoke up for Egypt's protesters and the Security Council debated solutions to the crises in Libya, Yemen, and (belatedly) Syria. Regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar attempted to set the agenda on the Syrian war by pushing resolutions targeting Assad through the General Assembly. EU members were broadly supportive of this approach. But as Russia refused to budge in the Security Council, the Saudis and Gulf monarchies lost faith.

From mid-2012 onwards, the Saudis turned against the UN and America's efforts to cooperate with Russia. Riyadh

¹ Richard Gowan and Franziska Brantner, "A Global Force for Human Rights? An Audit of European Power at the UN", European Council on Foreign Relations, 2008, p. 27, available at here: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR-08_A_GLOBAL_FORCE_FOR_HUMAN_RIGHTS-AN_AUDIT_OF_EUROPEAN_POWER_AT_THE_UN.pdf.

North Korean nuclear problem directly with the US at the UN, although the EU has managed to stake out a role on human rights in North Korea. China has quietly limited the UN's engagement in Myanmar. Beijing may be less interested than Moscow in constraining the West through the UN, but it does not see the UN as a major platform for building a new framework for collaboration with the US or the EU. At best, European and US diplomats can hope to moderate China's UN positions as an adjunct to a strategy for fixing their relations with the Russians.

demanding a harder, preferably military, approach. UN officials struggled to balance Russia's defence of Assad with the Arab League's continuing demands that Assad go. The Saudis and other Sunni partners have boosted their military support to anti-Assad forces, undercutting UN efforts to find a peace deal. Riyadh signalled its contempt for the UN and, by extension, the US by campaigning for, winning, and then rejecting a temporary seat on the Security Council in 2013. It is not clear whether this gesture was pre-meditated – the Saudi team in New York seemed genuinely confused – but Riyadh has continued to ramp up its anti-UN activities. These have spread to Yemen, where this year's Saudi-led intervention torpedoed long-running UN efforts to mediate a political settlement.

This level of disaffection is likely to rise if the UN backs a nuclear bargain with Iran. The UN also risks losing leverage in Africa, where direct tensions between the five permanent members of the Security Council (P5) are less extreme but the UN is nonetheless losing political altitude. Rising African powers such as South Africa, Ethiopia, and Nigeria have been openly dissatisfied with the UN's management of crises in Somalia, the Sudans, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. They have pushed for the African Union and other African organisations (such as ECOWAS in West Africa) to take a more autonomous line in handling future conflicts.

African governments are edging the UN out of diplomacy over the main crises on their continent. A group of east African states has taken over mediating the civil war in South Sudan, although UN peacekeepers are trapped guarding over 120,000 civilians in their camps. Disregarding the Security Council, Uganda has sent troops to support the South Sudanese government. The political process has stalled with depressing regularity. Meanwhile, the EU and UN have passed responsibility for peacemaking in Mali to the Algerian government. Overall, while Europe has invested heavily in the UN's efforts to handle crises in the Middle East and Africa, the organisation is still losing relevance in both regions.

Europe at the UN: Confronting or accommodating Russia?

Russia, this paper has argued, has developed an effective set of tactics to outmanoeuvre, constrain, and when possible divide the US and Europe at the UN. A growing number of African and Arab countries are prioritising regional security arrangements over the UN (see box text) and are sick of taking instruction from the Security Council. EU members have multiple bilateral and multilateral channels to these states: European countries pay virtually 100 percent of the costs of African Union peace operations such as the stabilisation force in Somalia. The question then arises whether the EU should bother trying to work through the UN when these other options exist.

But EU members cannot dispense with the UN that easily. Regional organisations may be able to fight local crises, but they cannot offer the legitimacy under international law that the UN Charter invests in the Security Council. Pragmatically, European officials see their UN counterparts as reliable partners in cases such as Syria and Yemen, and place greater trust in blue-helmet peace operations than local alternatives in crisis zones such as Mali. Like it or not, the dilemma of how to deal with China and Russia at the UN cannot be avoided.

There are two basic answers: confrontation and accommodation. In the course of the Syrian and Ukrainian wars, Britain, France, and other European members of the Security Council have oscillated between trying to shame Moscow through public challenges in the Security Council – including tabling resolutions that Moscow was certain to veto – and attempts to address its interests more or less openly.

Finding the right balance of confrontation and accommodation splits EU members at the UN just as it does in Brussels and other forums. Italy, we have noted, has argued that the UN should be a conduit to better relations with Russia – a theme that it may push further if, as is likely, it wins a temporary seat on the Security Council for 2016–2017 later this year. Luxembourg took a similar consensus-building approach in its work on resolutions over humanitarian access to Syria, which Russia grudgingly assented to after long debates. By contrast, Lithuania, a current temporary member of the Council, has used its seat to challenge Russia over Ukraine, convening repeated meetings on human rights abuses in Crimea. These have little or no direct effect – Russia refuses to attend and has deliberately undercut Lithuanian initiatives on other issues – but they have at least helped keep the issue alive.¹⁷

As permanent members of the Council, Britain and France obviously have vastly greater power to set the tone for European engagement with Russia in New York, and they have tried to challenge Moscow while keeping diplomacy alive. In addition to pushing deliberately controversial resolutions such as last year's proposal to refer Syria to the ICC, France has pursued a sustained campaign for

an agreement among the P5 not to use their vetoes in cases of mass atrocities. This has clearly been aimed at embarrassing Russia and China (although it also makes the US, which wields its veto to defend Israel, and the UK nervous). Moscow and Beijing have refused to engage, but France has won plaudits from small states and NGOs.

But Britain and France have also gone out of their way to reassure Russia that they remain willing to cooperate. We have noted one example of this over Ukraine, where the Europeans and US did not query Russia's right of veto over Crimea. This is part of a broader pattern of collaboration. In a period in which the P5 have been more and more antagonistic in public, they have actually deepened their cooperation in private. In recent years, they have increasingly cut other countries out of the process of devising resolutions on all serious matters – in most cases Britain, France, and the US agree a draft text and then share it with the Russians and Chinese for approval before it goes any further.¹⁸ They collaborated in 2012 to kill off a set of proposals on improving the Council's transparency drafted by a group of well-meaning states led by Switzerland.

It is arguable that, without this backroom bargaining, it would be harder to get any substantive resolutions through the Security Council. All members of the P5 are more likely to make compromises behind closed doors than in public. Yet this sort of close cooperation also makes it easier for Russia to pursue its strategy of entangling the US, Britain, and France in endless diplomatic dealings.

The EU has shaken up the P5 a little this year, as Federica Mogherini has pushed hard for a Security Council resolution endorsing military action against migrant-smugglers in the Mediterranean and on the Libyan coast. Given the European Council's support for such an action, there has been a strong sense that the EU should have a greater voice than usual in shaping the resolution. In May, Britain coordinated a resolution-drafting process involving all the other European members of the Council (France, Lithuania, and Spain) and consulting closely with Germany and Italy. Mogherini personally lobbied the Council. While the Libyan authorities have so far refused to give consent for such an operation, the EU has also failed to break down the basic laws of P5 cooperation: once the ad hoc "EU 4" and the US had worked on a text, their next move was still to consult with China and Russia.¹⁹

The Russians have hinted that they could veto the text and have embarrassed the Europeans with hard – and in this case justifiable – questions about what good the mission will do. However European powers coordinate at the UN, Moscow and Beijing can still use their built-in power in the UN system to shape the results.

18 For more details, see "In Hindsight: Penholders", Security Council Report, September 2013 Monthly Forecast, 29 August 2013, available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2013-09/in_hindsight_penholders.php.

19 "Briefing and Informal Interactive Dialogue on the Smuggling of Migrants in the Mediterranean", *What's In Blue*, Security Council Report, 8 May 2015, available at <http://www.whatsinblue.org/2015/05/briefing-and-informal-interactive-dialogue-on-the-smuggling-of-migrants-in-the-mediterranean.php>.

17 "Arria-Formula Meeting on Crimea and Eastern Ukraine", *What's In Blue*, Security Council Report, 18 March 2015, available at <http://www.whatsinblue.org/2015/03/arrria-formula-meeting-on-crimea-and-eastern-ukraine.php>.

Germany: Another absent power at the UN?

While British and French diplomats pride themselves on their ability to bargain with the Russians and Chinese (and there is no doubt that London and Paris still send some of the best and brightest to New York), they ultimately face two very deep strategic problems at the UN. One involves the US. The other centres on Germany.

The US, while usually happy to collaborate with Paris and London on UN affairs, is also willing to sideline them when its suits Washington. This, as we have seen, has been a defining characteristic of the Syrian crisis: at many points in the conflict, the Obama administration has ultimately decided to prioritise working with Russia rather than Britain and France. The Obama administration is unromantic about the fact that, in dealing with crises like those in the Sudans, it needs China's help more than it needs Europe's. Washington has also been irritated by France's insistence that the UN should help an increasing number of its former colonies in Africa (such as Mali and CAR), although it has avoided isolating Paris.

So while Britain and France enjoy their privileged status inside the UN bubble, they still know that they rely on American goodwill. Their dependency on Washington could become even more sensitive in 2017, when the generally pro-UN Obama administration gives way to its successor. Few observers believe that even a Clinton administration will be as supportive of the UN as the current team. A Republican administration could be vastly less multilateralist, despite the lessons of George W. Bush's presidency. French and British diplomats must be ready to navigate a much less friendly UN. This would mean turning for help to their EU allies, above all Germany.

Britain and France's second dilemma is that their prominence in the UN bubble does not match the reality of power dynamics in Europe. In the wake of the Ukraine crisis, it is clear that Berlin must be at the centre of any sustainable deal with Russia. It also enjoys a special relationship with Beijing.²⁰ If London and Paris want to maximise their leverage at the UN in future, they will need German backing. But at the UN, Germany is a second-rank power, institutionally blocked from acting as an equal with the P5. Germany is a loyal member of the UN and continues to agitate, if often half-heartedly, for a permanent seat on the Security Council. It has launched initiatives on issues ranging from data privacy to poaching in New York in recent years, and the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs has recently set up a new directorate-general specifically focused on "international order, the United Nations and arms control". But officials in Berlin still do not see the UN as a crucial part of their security strategy, or know much about it.

France and the UK have, in fact, turned to the UN to drive through policy initiatives that they know they could not get past the EU or NATO. The most obvious example of this – and of Berlin's difficulties in playing the UN game – came in

2011, when Paris and London pushed for an intervention in Libya in the face of German opposition. Germany fumbled the situation, abstaining on the resolution authorising military action against Gaddafi, annoying not only its main European allies but also the US. Detailed post-mortems of the abstention have emphasised that the Americans, British, and French only fitfully brought Berlin into their decision-making process (giving it a lower priority than other potential swing voters such as South Africa) and that German officials struggled to keep pace with events.²¹

The German mission in New York recovered relatively quickly from this debacle, pointedly staying close to Britain and France for the rest of its term. Nonetheless, the episode had demonstrated the EU's lack of a common voice at the UN, just as the Iraq war debates had done eight years previously. On a day-to-day basis, German diplomats have good access to their French and British counterparts. Beyond New York, Berlin's special status has long been reflected in its inclusion in contact groups such as the E3+3 (or P5+1) on Iran. Nonetheless, Berlin is still happy to let the UK and France take a lead on most UN issues.

Yet if European governments want to craft some sort of new *modus vivendi* with Russia through the UN, Germany must be part of it. Giving Berlin a more central role in UN diplomacy – through informal mechanisms, modelled on the E3+3 – could signal to Moscow and Beijing that they cannot continue to play diplomatic games at the UN without putting their most important European political relationship at risk.

The Hour of the E3?

A window of opportunity may be opening to launch a counter-push against Moscow and Beijing or – put in friendlier terms – to reset the terms for cooperation at the UN. As we noted in the introduction, a large number of contentious issues will be on the Security Council's agenda in the second half of 2015, including Libya, Palestine, and Iran. Much of the diplomacy around them will doubtless be poisonous.

But the Iranian case offers a glimmer of hope, in part because it has shown how multilateral great power diplomacy can work when liberated from the UN bubble. While Security Council talks on Syria and Ukraine have gone nowhere, the E3+3 have held together surprisingly well to date in their dealings with Tehran over its nuclear programme. China and Russia have not surrendered their interests in the process, but they have avoided alienating the E3 and US as talks have juddered towards a final agreement. If the talks culminate in a detailed deal, it could have a major impact on the Security Council, which will have to endorse the bargain and begin the process of dismantling sanctions against Iran. This would be by far the most important item on the Council's docket since its oversight of Iraq in the 1990s.

In a worst-case scenario, it would be another opportunity for Russia to play its tricks, especially over sanctions. The US has pushed hard for a "snap-back" mechanism that would restore sanctions on Iran automatically if it breached

²⁰ Hans Kundnani and Jonas Parello-Plesner, "China and Germany: Why the Emerging Special Relationship Matters for Europe", European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2012, available at http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR55_CHINA_GERMANY_BRIEF_AW.pdf.

²¹ For the fullest account, see Sarah Brockmeier, "Germany and the Intervention in Libya", *Survival*, Vol. 55, No. 6, 29 November 2013, pp. 63–90.

a nuclear deal. Moscow has argued that any such process would have to be subject to a Security Council vote in the last resort – though it has reportedly shown flexibility over how this would work, and the US has reportedly floated the idea of a special commission involving the E3+3 and EU to handle the issue outside usual Council structures.²² But it is easy to see how Moscow or Beijing could use this as a basis for exactly the sort of drawn-out diplomatic gamesmanship that they have used over Syria, increasing their overall leverage in the UN system.

Yet it is also possible that – if a satisfactory formula can be found with Tehran, Beijing, and Moscow – an Iran deal could offer European powers a chance to reset relations at the UN. This would involve piggy-backing on the Iran deal to propose a broader push by France, Germany, and the UK to use the E3+3 format to burst the UN bubble and search for fresh bargains on other points of contention, including Syria.

This would be advantageous not only because of the E3+3's legacy over Iran, but also because of Germany's status as an equal partner in the process. Berlin, Paris, and London have already flirted with using the same format in other fields. France led a joint E3 effort to agree a Security Council resolution on the parameters for an Israeli-Palestinian settlement in late 2014, despite the fact that Germany was not sitting inside the Security Council. This initiative failed when the Palestinians insisted on a vote on the issue in late December, causing the US to use its veto.²³ Nonetheless, if Britain and France were willing to work with Berlin in this format somewhat more frequently, it could send a signal to China and Russia that they can no longer take standard P5 politics at the UN for granted.

In practice, this could mean greater coordination with German officials on key resolutions going before the Security Council – and more joint demarches in Beijing and Moscow in support of major priorities at the UN. At a minimum, such cooperation would suggest that China and Russia could not entirely detach their bilateral and trade relations with Berlin from their multilateral policies. There would doubtless be limits to such coordination: Germany is never going to strain its diplomatic muscles to help France sort out small wars in all of its former colonies. But closer E3 coordination could at least shake Beijing and Moscow's assumptions about the costs and benefits of sidelining or blocking European goals in New York.

Such an approach would have negative impacts elsewhere: many other EU members would see it as an implicit attack on the Union's own efforts to build a single identity at the UN. But while Federica Mogherini has brought some new energy to these efforts, the External Action Service (EAS) is still not a major player in UN affairs. It has fought some bold battles – steering resolutions on North Korean human rights abuses through the General Assembly despite China's displeasure

– but Britain in particular has blocked it from developing a strong role in security matters.²⁴ Similarly, while the Security Council and EU Political and Security Committee now meet on a regular basis, their discussions do not represent a threat to Britain and France's position inside the P5.

By contrast, successive EU foreign policy chiefs have won kudos for their role in chairing the E3+3 talks on Iran, and this may again provide a model for broader E3 cooperation, with the EAS included as a regular partner in the group's consultations.

That might not satisfy individual EU member states, and some sort of flexible geometry might be needed to draw in countries such as Italy when dealing with a case like Libya. But an active E3 would find that the main obstacle to their ambitions remained persuading China and Russia (and indeed the US) to break the normal practices of intra-P5 bargaining to let Germany play a more active role.

In many cases, it would still only be France and the UK that could cut bargains at the UN. But Germany could make its influence felt beyond the Security Council chamber. Berlin could, for example, propose regular meetings of E3+3 foreign ministers, starting in Germany, to discuss UN issues beyond Iran. This would build on the Iranian precedent and offer an alternative discussion format to the overweight G20 and Western-facing G7. Such meetings, held away from the New York bubble, could also be a way to balance against Russia's game-playing in the UN system, potentially permitting frank discussions rather than procedural manoeuvres.

Some European diplomats question whether Germany has the stomach for such a bold initiative concerning the UN. It will always seem safer for Berlin to leave the curious business of top-flight UN diplomacy to Paris and London – and many if not most French and British officials are happy to leave it that way. But if Berlin is not willing to take greater responsibility at the UN, and if its primary allies in Europe are not willing to cede some of their privileges, then Europe can only prepare itself for an indefinite decline in its influence at the UN as real-world politics take their course.

Equally, giving Germany a greater voice would not be a magic solution to Europe's problems at the UN. But, at a minimum, it would be an opportunity to test whether Russia is willing to talk about UN affairs more constructively and whether Beijing is willing to invest more in the organisation. If they do not, it may be time for Europe to drop the illusion of "effective multilateralism" and follow the example of those Arab and African powers that are already distancing themselves from the UN. This would be a huge blow to Europe's world vision. But it would also be a blow to Russia and China, who have taken advantage of the West's commitment to the UN, and would lose some of their diplomatic leverage if Europe walked away from hopeless bargaining in New York.

²² George Jahn, "Russia, US close on 'snap-back' sanctions", *Associated Press*, 26 May 2015, available at <http://news.yahoo.com/ap-newsbreak-russia-us-close-iran-snap-back-203518044.html>; Colum Lynch and John Hudson, "How Russia could make or break the Iran Deal," *Foreign Policy*, 24 June 2015, available at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/06/24/how-russia-could-make-or-break-the-iran-deal/>.

²³ "January 2015 Monthly Forecast: Israel/Palestine," Security Council Report, 23 December 2014, available at http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2015-01/israelpalestine_8.php.

²⁴ See Alex J. Bellamy, "A chronic protection problem: the DPRK and the Responsibility to Protect", *International Affairs*, Vol. 91, No. 2, March 2015, available at <http://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/chronic-protection-problem-dprk-and-responsibility-protect>; and Edith Drieskens, "Curb your enthusiasm: why an EU perspective on UN Security Council reform does not imply an EU seat", *Global Affairs*, 1:1, 28 January 2015, pp. 59–66, available at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23340460.2014.970468>.

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