

Challenges Facing the UN Security Council: Past, Present and Future

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Lord Hannay

Good afternoon, everyone. I am David Hannay. I was permanent representative to the UN rather a long time ago, between 1990 and 1995, but I do keep in touch with UN things through having been chair of the UN Association (many of whose members I am glad to see here today) for five or six years. Then I chaired the All-Party Parliamentary Group on the UN, which meets pretty regularly, most recently to hear the new special adviser on the Responsibility to Protect last week, Jennifer Welsh.

I'm here just to provide the feeds to Mark Lyall Grant, who I'm sure is known to most in this room as the current ambassador to the UN. If I could just start with a couple of logistical things which I am told I mustn't forget. The event is being jointly hosted by the United Nations Association and Chatham House, and also with the participation of at least one member of the UN All-Party Group (I, myself). It is being held on the record. It is being live-streamed on the Chatham House website. People can comment via Twitter using #CHEvents and ask questions via #AskCH.

I should just mention that the UNA-UK is having its big annual forum, a full day of discussion about UN topics, on the 28th of June. Hopefully some people in this room will decide afterwards that they're so interested by what Mark has said that they would like to sign up and hear more at the end of June.

So much for the logistics. It's a testing time, of course, for the UN. I say that because it's one of those more-down-than-up moments in the roller coaster which the UN always seems to ride on. It's even more important then, to hear from someone like Mark, who is there at the coalface, what it seems to be like now, how bad the situation is, what can be done and what can't be done.

When I say that it's a testing time it's because there are, for an outsider like myself, some of the symptoms of Cold War paralysis that we had affecting at least two parts of the world – three really: Syria; anywhere in the borders of Russia; and anywhere between China and its neighbours in the East China and South China Seas. For all those three areas, it's quite difficult to see how the UN Security Council can operate. Indeed, it has been prevented from operating by vetoes on at least two of them and would be on the third (the South China Sea) if anybody ever had the temerity to take it to the Security Council.

So perhaps, Mark, I could start by just asking you to talk a bit about this – it's not a full Cold War situation, because during the Cold War, of course, there was blanket paralysis. People lined up on one or other side and it was really almost impossible for the UN to do anything about even regional disputes which were nothing much to do with the main players. It's not like that. But could you perhaps say something about what it is like in that respect – that is to say, the paralysed subjects. Perhaps we could go on after that to look at the non-paralysed ones, and are they likely to stay non-paralysed.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

Yes, thank you very much, David. It's a pleasure to be here today.

I think that is the main difference between now and the Cold War. Yes, we have a complete blockage on Syria, and have had more or less complete blockage for three years now. There have been the odd shafts of light. We did get the resolution on chemical weapons. It's a broadly positive story, although not completely positive, and we got the humanitarian resolution through also in January. That has allowed us at least to continue to discuss Syrian issues and make some common cause with the Russians and Chinese on those issues.

On Ukraine, of course, there is a complete paralysis. We tried to put a resolution forward that we thought would get widespread acceptance. We were not surprised by the Russian veto but we feel we pitched it about right; the fact that China abstained was a good sign that we did get that one about right.

But the big difference is that on other business – and we shouldn't forget that Africa still makes up, as it probably did in your day, David, about 60 to 65 per cent of Security Council business. And on that, Russia has actually been at pains to show that it's still prepared to be cooperative. So whether we're looking at Somalia or South Sudan or Mali or Central African Republic, those sorts of issues, there is broadly business as usual, you might say, in the Security Council.

Secondly, we shouldn't completely lose sight of the non-Security Council business, where the dynamic is extremely different. Arguably the most important agenda that faces the UN at the moment is the post-2015 development agenda. There, the split-up is completely different. You have, in a sense, the Latin Americans and Indians on one side, partly supported by the Russians, who want to focus on Western development aid and on environmental issues; you have the Africans and the Europeans trying to focus on eradication of absolute poverty. So that's just one example. Climate change, the dynamics are very different. Non-proliferation, where actually the P-5 are sort of aligned against many others.

So it's not paralysed in the way that it was completely in the Cold War, but there's no doubt that the atmosphere has got more bitter on these blocked issues. We've had a number of meetings of the Security Council – 15 meetings of the Security Council on Ukraine – and some of the language is fairly undiplomatic, even in the public sessions (let alone in the private sessions). It's very similar to that on Syria.

Lord Hannay

Do you think that that distinction between the paralysed part of the Security Council and the un-paralysed part can be sustained? Is that sustainable if the confrontations over the South and East China Seas, Ukraine and Syria – which very well could do – get sharper? Do you think that can be maintained? Do you think, for example, that the Iran nuclear issue, which one day or another is quite likely to come back to the Security Council in one form or another, whether because there will have been an agreement and there will be a phased lifting of sanctions, or whether because there's a failure to agree and there will be a major threat to international peace and security – do you think that that can be sustained in that sort of half-paralysed, half-not-paralysed world, or is it likely to spread?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

I think it can be sustained subject to one criteria: if Russian forces went across the border into eastern and southern Ukraine, then we are in a Cold War situation. Then I think we would see a reversion to what we had during the Cold War. That would completely change the norm. That would be such an attack on the sort of international order, going well beyond what's happened in Crimea, that I think it would be virtually impossible to do business as usual on African conflict issues and other issues that the Security Council deals with.

Lord Hannay

Right, so we'll have to watch that space. Perhaps you could just say a little bit about the Responsibility to Protect, which seems rather, to my mind, like the concept that dare not speak its name. That is to say, that the UN is actually doing several operations which under any conceivable analysis are the Responsibility to Protect – like South Sudan or Mali or the Central African Republic, or possibly you could say even Somalia – but as far as I can see, nobody ever wants to call it that, because that blows several fuses and starts nerves jangling and so on. But could you say something, particularly as we now have a new special adviser who is in London talking to a UNA conference last week, Jennifer Welsh, who I found most impressive. Could you say a bit about how you think R2P can be taken ahead?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

I don't think it's quite as bad as that, David. If you start having a theoretical discussion about Responsibility to Protect in a seminar format or this sort of format, then very quickly the views are polarized. But as you say, in practice, in the Security Council mandates that we're adopting every week, we are not only employing the concept of Responsibility to Protect Civilians but also we're actually putting in the words 'Responsibility to Protect', which have now appeared in something like 15 different resolutions since 2005. So it is being used in the context of preventing genocide, protecting civilians in African conflicts in particular.

But it is true that at the academic level there has been a bit of a pushback against it, because there are many people who fear that we are using the concept of Responsibility to Protect to justify intervention, cutting across sovereignty and territorial integrity. But in practice, it's there. There is an adviser on Responsibility to Protect. There's a Group of Friends, of which the United Kingdom is one, a cross-cutting – it's actually co-chaired by Rwanda and the Netherlands, the two co-chairs of the Responsibility to Protect Group of Friends – which meets and does talk about those sort of cross-cutting theoretical issues.

But basically, protection of civilians has become the centrepiece of almost all UN peacekeeping missions in a way it wasn't 15 or 20 years ago. So all the instances you've mentioned but also many others. We are focusing peacekeeping on protecting civilians in situations where either their government is unable to protect them or unwilling to protect them or is indeed part of the problem in the first place.

Lord Hannay

Am I right in thinking that the great white whale of UN diplomacy, the enlargement of the Security Council, is not only un-harpooned but is out there swimming in the great ocean and not likely to be harpooned in the foreseeable future?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

It's been swimming for about 15 years now. There's a certain amount of thrashing around, and certainly the harpoon boats are circling. But I'm not optimistic that it will be nailed in the near future, no. The trouble is that there is an overwhelming support at the United Nations for reform of the Security Council

but everyone has a slightly different vision and a vested interest in how that reform should happen and in what shape. Those opposing forces are blocking the chances of any breakthrough in it. As I say, the intensity of the discussions is increasing, but my personal view is that until the African bloc changes its position on Security Council reform, it's unlikely to make any dramatic progress.

Lord Hannay

Presumably, neither the Chinese nor the Americans are actually going to lose any sleep over the fact that it's swimming around there, because they are both of them likely to be naysayers if it ever became a practicality.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

Yes. China, in particular, is virulently opposed to Japan and indeed India joining the Security Council, and they're probably, of the permanent members, the least enthusiastic about Security Council reform. The Russians are much more positive. The Americans are not against it but just don't see it as a priority. They see the debate being blocked and in the Washington policy formulation, one doesn't really get serious inter-agency discussion until an issue becomes real, and they don't feel it's real yet. So it's just not a top priority for them.

Lord Hannay

Just to pick up on – sorry, I forgot to mention on Responsibility to Protect – just picking up on this French initiative, which is the suggestion that there should be a kind of gentleman's agreement amongst the five permanent members that if a genocide is either taking place or threatened to take place, there would be no question of using the veto. An idea which was in fact in the High-Level Panel report of 2004. How is that faring? Are we going to throw our weight behind it, as I hope we will?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

There's a lot of support for it at the UN. We're certainly interested by that idea. But we would like to make sure that it is at least a P-3 idea, that if the United States, France and the UK were together deciding to pursue it, then there could be some potential value in it. I don't think there's really any value in it doing it at the UK-France level. Of course best of all would be if there was agreement among the P-5 but we're a very long way from that. The informal discussions we've had suggest that that's not likely to change in the near future.

Lord Hannay

Could you give us perhaps a preview, which I'm sure everyone here would find fascinating, to the 2016 election of a new secretary-general?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

There's a number of interesting elements about the election of the secretary-general. One is that there is a view that it's Eastern Europe's turn. They have not had a UN secretary-general from the Eastern European region. They feel that it is their turn. However, there is no formal rotation, as there is in some other elections at the UN, and therefore there is nothing to stop candidates from other parts of the world also chucking their hat into the ring.

The second point I would make is there has been a significant grade inflation in international jobs. Many undersecretaries-general at the United Nations are ex-heads of state and government. Therefore, it's quite likely that a secretary-general next time around will come from that category of politician.

The third point I would make is that there is a sort of view, an undercurrent anyway, that maybe it's time for a female secretary-general of the United Nations.

Now you put all that together against the cross-section of about ten Eastern European candidates that have already chucked their names into the ring, either formally or informally, and there are still some names that meet all three categories. It will be interesting to see who emerges. It's a waiting game, as you'll remember, David. It's not always the leader – in fact, it's very rarely the frontrunner that gets through. There is a predisposition to – I wouldn't say lowest common denominator but finding a compromise candidate who is acceptable to everybody, because there are certain members, including certain P-5 members (not the United Kingdom), who have a slightly different vision of the secretary-general as being someone who, to put it very crudely, is the servant of the member states rather than the leader of the organization. Or as Ban Ki-moon sometimes says, more secretary than general.

Our view is we would want the best possible secretary-general with the best possible qualifications and leadership skills because we believe in the multilateral system, we believe in the UN. We want it to be a strong institution. But that view is not universally shared, it has to be said.

The other dynamic I would mention which is going to be interesting about this election is that traditionally the selection and election of the secretary-general of the UN is a sort of P-5 prerogative, and a closely preserved prerogative. That, I think, is beginning to break down. There will be much greater pressure from the General Assembly to have a say in the candidates. Whether that will mean simply candidates, once they're sort of formally announced and out there – and let's not forget it will be summer 2016 when the decision is taken, so it's still two years away – they will be encouraged to come to the General Assembly, set out their stall, set out their manifestoes, if you like. That, I think, would be sort of normal and not controversial.

What would become slightly more controversial is if the General Assembly wanted to go one step further and on the back of those hustings, those hearings, were to decide to make a recommendation to the Security Council on who they thought would be the best candidate. My guess is there will be so many divisions it won't be possible to do that. But then I think the Security Council and the P-5 members might push back against that, as going against the articles of the Charter.

Lord Hannay

On the East Europeans, the East European group is now just a fiction really. It exists for electoral purposes but not in any meaningful other way. Of course, it was created in completely different circumstances. But ironically, I imagine that anybody who we thought was in good standing in East Europe would be likely to attract a Russian veto now, which is not a very happy situation. Is there any way in which in 2016 we can at least get away from regional pre-emption in the first round of people putting their names forward? That is to say, encourage a global slate of people, knowing that an element of rotation will undoubtedly enter into the final choice. That might be some way of finessing the East Europeans' attempt to run such a pre-emptive operation.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

Yes. We haven't taken a formal position on that and are unlikely to do so until after the next election in the UK, because obviously this is a decision in which our ministers and our prime minister will take a very close interest. We formally do not accept the idea of rotation but equally we are not formally contesting it at this stage. There are, as I mentioned, a couple of candidates who are hovering around from outside the region, who certainly might come into play. I think if that starts to happen you could get a snowball effect and many other people will come in.

But of course there are some regions who are next in line who have an interest in having their turn coming down the pike. So they may be a little more resistant to breaking the rotation.

Lord Hannay

Yes. The idea you were suggesting about hustings or manifestoes does seem to me to be a thoroughly good one, and one which should be encouraged. Is that not how it looks to you?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

I think so.

Lord Hannay

Because if nothing else, among other things, it would mean that whoever is finally chosen has got a little bit of a mandate, because he would have said what he was going to try and do in broad terms. So something that's always been lacking hitherto, where secretary-general candidates have tended to tell the five permanent members exactly what each of them wants to hear, which of course was never identically the same, that would to some extent be short-circuited.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

Yes. I think in principle it's a good idea. Indeed, it's only really an extension of what happens now, because Ban Ki-moon will tell you that when he was a candidate he went to the African Union Summit, he went to the ASEAN Summit, he went to the East Asian meetings. So he sort of went and presented himself but in each regional grouping rather than coming to the UN. I think it's only a logical extension of that. It would have to be informal obviously, but some sort of informal event in which all member states could be represented, to have a chance to have a look at the candidate, ask questions, sort of get a cut of their jib as well.

Lord Hannay

The Ban case was, alas, I suspect a *locus classicus* for having a rather weak field by accepting regional pre-emption before you started. Apart from Ban, the field was very weak indeed.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

I wasn't involved at that stage but I think there were quite a number of candidates.

Lord Hannay

They weren't, I think, all that outstanding, frankly. Anyway, perhaps we could just finish, before we throw the floor open to questions – perhaps you could just say a little bit about Britain's position at the UN. Of course, we have virtually no peacekeepers deployed because of our preoccupation with Afghanistan, and before that with Iraq. Is that going to change? Are we going to play a more prominent role in UN peacekeeping than in the past? What would be the effect at the UN of a 'yes' vote in Scotland? That's probably enough to be going on with.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

What I would say is that the United Kingdom's standing at the UN is very high. Obviously we have a privileged position as a permanent member of the Security Council but the fact that we are the only G20 country – and I say G20, not just G7 or G8 – to meet the 0.7 per cent development target for overseas aid gives us a huge credibility and platform on which to use our influence in the General Assembly, well beyond the Security Council. Of course the English language is a massive benefit in terms of negotiating in every fora at the UN. So those sort of three legs of the stool, as I see it, are very much there.

On the peacekeeping side, yes, we are looking at, and I'm in close contact with the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office ministers on this, that as we draw down from Afghanistan there is the opportunity to reengage in slightly bigger numbers in UN peacekeeping. We have a very strong interest in UN

peacekeeping. We pay a premium as a P-5 member to the budget of the peacekeeping. The budget is going up as we instituted and mandated new peacekeeping operations in Mali and more recently in Central African Republic. We've upped it in South Sudan, etc. So we have a very strong interest in making that work. Therefore, the Ministry of Defence is looking at the possibility over the next few years in contributing a little bit more, particularly in some of the niche capabilities – helicopters, UAVs, intelligence, strategic airlift and those sort of things in which the traditional troop contributors maybe don't have the same capacity to meet the changing need of conflict.

Scotland, well, we're not making any contingency plans on Scotland. The government is confident (but not complacent) that that will be won, that the referendum will not vote for Scottish independence. If it does, obviously we will deal with that at the time. There are precedents that one can draw around the world if that happens.

Lord Hannay

Yes. The most recent precedent was, of course, the Soviet Union metamorphosing into the Russian Federation – occurred in 24 hours, overnight. So you might have to move quite fast if that happened. Just one final word before throwing it open. You spoke a little about the MDGs. The Paris 2015 climate change conference: how is the UN going to avoid the really rather appalling precedent of Copenhagen, which should, I would have hoped, reminded people that getting 192 people around a table (or a lot of tables probably) in a capital and expecting them to solve problems that they haven't pre-solved before is not to be encouraged. Is there any thought going into all this? Because this really is – it's not quite perhaps going to be the last chance because the climate is still going to be with us whatever happens, but it is a pretty important moment.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant

Ban Ki-moon is very aware of that. This is one of his priorities for the remainder of his term. He has called a summit in September this year, to which he's invited all the leaders, to try and pre-plan the Paris meeting in 2015. He has written to all the leaders already and encouraged them to come to New York with some very ambitious proposals of what they're prepared to do and to see whether that generates a sufficient ambition and sufficient commonality that one might be able to reach agreement.

But there are some quite interesting things happening on climate. China's position has changed in quite a significant way. That's one interesting development that could change the dynamics of the negotiation for next year.

So it's not a hopeless case. I certainly agree with you that it needs a lot of preparation. Happily, most of that negotiation and preparation doesn't happen in New York, it happens at the UNFCCC that's based in Bonn. So we don't get involved in the nitty-gritty sort of negotiations. But I do chair a friends' group on climate change of about 30 ambassadors in New York, to try to galvanize them to galvanize their own governments to try and be as ambitious as possible, and try and reach a legally binding agreement, which is obviously the eventual aim.