The Next Flashpoint: Potential Threats to Peace and Security in 2015

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Question 1

Did you see early warning signs in Venezuela? Do you think that the conflict that now is subsiding in Colombia could move to Venezuela, or have some similarities with what's happening in Mexico? The violence is really rampant there.

Jean-Marie Guehenno

We have put Venezuela on our list actually, precisely because we see a situation with very weak institutions and an incredibly polarized society. So I think one should not be complacent about Venezuela. It's very important to focus on that country. I do hope that the efforts of UNASUR and of the region will help to bring together the actors in Venezuela, but it will require much stronger engagement than what we see at the moment, frankly.

Question 2

Do you agree that the picture you painted under the diffusion of power makes the current Security Council totally irrelevant?

Jean-Marie Guehenno

I would say the picture is more complex than that. I wouldn't say completely irrelevant. I think obviously the powers which are in the Security Council still wield a lot of power. The United States, China, have considerable power. The United Kingdom has considerable power. Russia has considerable power. France has considerable power. So I wouldn't say the Security Council is completely irrelevant. I would say that it has not adjusted to the new distribution of power.

Once one has said that, first, there is the practical question of how to reform the Security Council. Frankly, when you look at the very difficult negotiation of the UN Charter in 1945, when there was one power, the United States – that was the true unipolar moment. Even then, the negotiation of the UN Charter was a complicated affair, with a much smaller number of countries. It was after a world war and tens of millions of deaths. I think now reform of the Security Council is a much harder thing to do than it was creating it in 1945.

Then you have the question on how to reform it, frankly, because the members of the Security Council have to represent the distribution of power in the world. They also have to be committed to a certain way of addressing issues. If by a magic wand you had 15 or 20 new powers in the Security Council (which is not on the cards), I'm not sure it would work in any way. It would actually be paralysed, most likely.

So the question is not just a question of membership, and that's why I talked about champions of multilateralism. It's a question of having a set of principles to manage international affairs, on which the community of nations agrees. One concern that I did not address in my talk, which I think is very important, is that not only the emerging norms that we saw developing in the first decade of this century are under threat, but the basic norms that were agreed in 1945 are under threat. That's fundamental.

That's the question of what constitutes aggression, in the age of cyber warfare, in the age of unsigned attacks. So the basic deal of the United Nations Charter, Article 51, which restricted the use of unilateral use of force to one exception, so to speak – when you are attacked – and the attack, it was with the memory of what had happened in World War II: an army crosses your border, that's a clear sign of attack. Now you have a much more complicated situation. You can either enlarge the concept of self-defence and you change the balance between what the Security Council decides and what unilaterally countries can decide; or, if you stick to a rigorous interpretation, then you have to trust the Security Council to take action, which it will not because it is itself paralysed. So the problems are much deeper, sadly, than the question of membership.

Question 2

[follow-up question; off-mike]

Jean-Marie Guehenno

Russia, traditionally, was committed to a legal order. The annexation of Crimea raises great questions on it.

Question 3

You mentioned the weakness of states as a main threat today. We all know that most conflicts are now internal and asymmetrical. Can you speak a bit more about the implications for our approach to intervention and mediation?

Question 4

You talked at the beginning about early warning, and obviously we all agree that's much better than action after the event. You say there are more options available to you when you act early. The problem that I see very often is that early warning or early action, before the crisis happens, is even more interventionist (or has to be) than action when the crisis has happened, because there's no justification for it. When the crisis has happened, everybody can see why you are doing it. Before it happens, it's very hard to find those justifications. Nigeria might be a good example, where people could see years and years ago that this was a very weak and fragmented state, but how would you intervene in Nigeria? You would never have permission of the – I don't mean military intervention, I mean all sorts of other actions. How would you persuade the Nigerian government to accept that? So how do we overcome that problem of acting before there's a very obvious reason to act?

Question 5

Along the same lines, what are the criteria we put in the basket for the early warning? Does one size fit all? Do you do it in cases across the board, or do you custom-make it in different countries, taking into account the culture, the history and all these things? I have a problem with that as well, in defining this.

Jean-Marie Guehenno

Weakness of states, does it make intervention and mediation more complicated – yes. Intervention, because the question – there is no international consensus on what is legitimate and what is not, in engaging in the internal affairs of a state. So there is also no consensus on how long you have to accompany a state in rebuilding it. So that makes the whole notion of shoring up states much more difficult, because there is no political consensus, there is not always the capacity, frankly, and there is not the conceptual understanding of what needs to be done. So there is an intellectual deficit, there is a political deficit, and a capacity deficit.

On mediation, it broadens the range of actors that need to engage in mediation. Very often, states are not the best actors to engage in mediation, for the reasons I alluded to: they don't want to talk to actors that they would be seen as legitimizing. So sometimes having a non-governmental organization play a role in bringing the parties together, that does not have the implication of a formal recognition and that can pave the way to mediation. So I think we need to adjust to this world of weak states with a much broader range of instruments than when it was just about managing relations between states.

Early warning, early action: the problem is manifold. One is early warning – you don't get much support at home to engage, because public opinion is mobilized by tragedies that they see on their television screen. So the level of support you get is weaker, the earlier you want to engage. Acceptance of engagement on the receiving end is the other facet. There, I would say the best way to approach it is probably not to flag that there is a risk of genocide or a catastrophic risk, because that will make the country that you want to engage with very nervous. Countries do not react like individuals. When you are afraid of being sick, you like to see the doctor to check that you are not. When a country is sick, it doesn't want to see any doctor because it's afraid it will reveal greater sickness. So there is a deep reluctance of countries to admit that they have problems.

That is where I think nimble diplomacy, low-key diplomacy, is probably the most effective way to be accepted and to engage. Frankly, it doesn't always work, because countries can just reject any engagement, even if it's low-key. But if there is a chance, it's usually through low-key engagement with actors with credibility and personal credibility. Again, having non-state peacemakers can help. You have groups like the Elders which can play, up to a point, a certain role, because they certainly don't wield any other power than the power they experienced, which is considerable.

On the criteria for early warning, this is something we are grappling with, because I don't think you can just feed into a machine a certain number of boxes that you would just tick and say, oh, this country is going to break up and be in crisis. If we did that, I think we would be like the economists who predicted five of the last recessions. There are a number of countries that have worrying signs but then you have to look at the fabric of society, at a number of elements that are more political than quantitative, that can hold a country together or, on the contrary, precipitate its downfall. That's where I think our methodology at Crisis Group is good, because we do have people who engage in sort of granular analysis of what is

really happening on the ground. We don't just look at statistics. I think statistics matter but they don't provide the full answer.

Question 6

I was really interested in what you were saying about emphasizing talking and reaching a political solution to crises, and the balance between a sort of military response. I was just wondering whether you thought that at the moment the UN architecture is set up to emphasize that in the same kind of way. Looking at the Department of Peacekeeping Operations and the Department of Political Affairs, and the types of deployment that they put in and the way that those two speak to each other – especially in terms of the review of peace operations that I think is happening at the moment.

Question 7

You mentioned the Responsibility to Protect. My question is, when does the R2P come into play in these conflicts, and who initiates it to come into play?

Jean-Marie Guehenno

On the UN structure, I would start by saying that the more troops I had under my responsibility, when I was under-secretary for peacekeeping, the more convinced I was that indeed they provided important leverage in the management of crisis – but at the same time, their role should be limited. I think the present architecture of the UN takes a much too linear view of conflict resolution. We tend to think in terms of peace enforcement, let's say done by coalitions of the willing, followed by peacekeeping, followed by peacebuilding – or in either/or terms, you have political engagement or you deploy peacekeepers. The reality is that each situation requires, in different proportions, a mix of instruments, which can be political, military, developmental – a range of instruments. The danger at the moment is that you have a militarized response with peacekeeping, and a political response that would ignore the leverage that the military force can provide, if you look at things in purely political terms. I think the UN would be well advised to introduce some kind of flexibility in the way it combines the various instruments that it can deploy. In the future, I think one has to have a much more modular approach to UN engagement in crises, because otherwise there is a risk that bureaucratic logics will trump political needs.

On R2P, I have been confronted with situations of R2P – you could say what was happening in Darfur, and still happening in Darfur, or what's happening obviously in Syria today. I think the difficulty that we face today is that sometimes we set ourselves very ambitious goals where we don't have the resources and the means, and if there was to be a solution, it would be a political solution, in the grey area of compromise. Sometimes for the sake of the best, we ignore the good, or the less bad. That's the challenge of international engagement in many crises, where there's a gap between the rhetoric of wanting to get things right and the actual political willingness to follow up with real action. It's even more than that: it's not just action, it's the fact that to engage in the lives of other communities, very often the blunt instrument of force doesn't work. It will create reactions and counter-reactions.

So I think while R2P is a fundamental principle of collective responsibility, that we should deeply believe that what is beyond our borders is not beyond our moral responsibility – while we should deeply believe that, at the same time I think we should be much more humble in the way we are prepared to help others. Sometimes bluster gives false hopes that then are disappointed, that harden positions, and we abandon the possibility of an imperfect settlement for the mirage of a solution that doesn't come.

Question 8

You said that a lot of the problems we have are because we have less respect for borders. With the exception of the Middle East and Africa, would you say that a lot of the problems we have are because of the cavalier way we handled the borders of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia?

Question 9

I'm wondering if you can speak more generally about ways in which you imagine the crisis in Ukraine could have been prevented, and how you made sense of arguments by those, like John Mearsheimer, who argue that had the West been more sensitive to Russia's interpretation of Ukraine's (would-be) ascension into the EU or NATO, the crisis could have been averted.

Patricia Lewis

I have one question – I thought it would come up, because you specifically mentioned it in your talk – and that's the special role of women. You talked about it in the bottom-up – I hate that it's always a woman who asks this question. Men: ask the question. You talked about it in the bottom-up process, which I think is absolutely right. We've had so many attempts now, through Resolution 1325 and its associated follow-ups, to try to ensure that women are at the table and negotiating part of the settlement. This just doesn't seem to be happening. I think we see the results of it, the impoverished results. I'd like you to comment on that, if possible.

Jean-Marie Guehenno

Three important questions. On the way we handled borders and the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, I think beyond the question of borders there's a question of the legitimacy of a human community and of a nation-state. For instance, you hear people blaming both my compatriot and your compatriot, Mr Picot and Mr Sykes, for all the terrible things that are happening in the Middle East. Behind that criticism there is the idea of, let's get the right borders for the region. I don't think there are right borders. No border is right. The question is, how do you create legitimacy, and the competing sources of legitimacy.

So the breakup of the Soviet Union, the breakup of Yugoslavia, drew the line: administrative borders, republics, but not [indiscernible]. These were legal arrangements, not based on any historical understanding. I'm not saying that it should have been based on a historical understanding. I think we

have to recognize the arbitrariness of borders. The way we have dealt with it and are trying to continue dealing with it in the European Union is making the borders less relevant. I would have thought that for Yugoslavia as for the states of the former Soviet Union, of course that would normally be the right answer. The search for the ideal border is an unending search. When we look at our own countries, our borders in Europe, which is the most constrained space in the world – it's peaceful because it has had centuries of war to decide the borders, and now we think of them as natural borders. Maybe the United Kingdom has natural borders but most of the continental countries –

Patricia Lewis

We have our own borders within the United Kingdom.

Jean-Marie Guehenno

I heard of that. But arbitrary borders.

The question of Ukraine, it's a good example of whether you look at long-term conflict prevention or short-term conflict prevention. I would say that the whole collapse of the Soviet Union, it happened a bit like 9/11. It was the whole edifice came crashing down without much thought being given to it. We have to accept that. There was a sense of triumphalism which did not go well on the other side, in Moscow, certainly. I think the way competition developed between the European Union and NATO for enlargement was something that was not healthy, because even with all the efforts – and NATO made a lot of efforts to open up to Russia (the Partnership, etc.) – but with all those efforts, there's no question that this alliance was built against the Soviet Union. So it was always hard for Russia to see NATO as a friendly organization. There's a history that you cannot overlook so easily. Creating a measure of flexibility in Europe by disconnecting the enlargement of the European Union and the enlargement of NATO might have been a way to develop the bridges with Russia that were needed.

One could say that the best scenario for Ukraine – but I'm speaking maybe in the past now, and that's the sad part of it – the best scenario for Ukraine would have been to connect the western part of Europe and Russia. That is obviously now becoming a moat, so to speak, it's becoming a line of separation. I think to avoid that, that would probably have required a different, less triumphalist management of Russia in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, more humility and not connecting the NATO enlargement and the EU enlargement.

But here we are now, and it's important to show strength while at the same time keeping bridges open. Ukraine goes to the heart of Russian interests and Russian identity. A lot of tensions today are tensions and conflicts about identity. So we would be unwise to ignore that identity dimension. At the same time, we have to protect an international legal order that has been challenged. So we have to navigate between those two imperatives.

On women, I was struck throughout my career at the United Nations by the important role that women could play when they were given a role, which was seldom, to be honest. Played an important role, for instance, in the peace process in Liberia. I think the role of women in peacemaking, in a way, is an illustration of how in well-designed peace processes more broadly, you give a seat to those who have no

guns, which is essential to sustaining peace. Of course, it's easier said than done, because if you ignore those with guns, you ignore them at your own peril. Every peace process has to start with those with guns. But well-designed peace processes have to be broadened so that those who have no guns get a seat at the table and gradually become more important. That's why I also believe that peace processes should be managed in stages. Trying to set everything in one negotiation is usually dangerous, because it gives too much influence to those who have guns. If you manage a peace process in stages, you have a much better chance of giving a voice to those who have no guns and to half of the society, that is, the women. Thank you.

Patricia Lewis

Thank you very much, Jean-Marie. Thanks all of you here for your participation and fascinating questions. I know there were many more, I'm sorry we weren't able to take them all. I particularly want to thank you, Jean-Marie, for coming to London. I'm really excited you're going to open an office here and we welcome you to the London community of think tanks and non-governmental intellectual input into all these debates. Thank you, we hope you come back again very soon.