How Things Were

The ‘P-3’ and ‘New Interventionism’ of the 1990s

For much of the 1990s it was commonplace for observers of the United Nations (UN) Security Council to speak of the dominant influence on Council proceedings and outcomes of the ‘P-3’, meaning the United Kingdom (UK), France and the United States (US). These were the powers whose policies and interests, in the final analysis, determined the character and extent of UN involvement in peace and security, including in the then rapidly evolving field of peacekeeping. As differences over the UN’s involvement in the former Yugoslavia plainly demonstrated, this did not mean that there was agreement among them on every issue, merely that the dynamics within the Council – the key to understanding its workings, politics and policies – revolved around their relationship.

There was considerable justification for this view at the time, in part because the P-3 did in fact drive much of the Council’s activity and, in the case of France and the UK, backed up diplomatic activism with substantial military contributions to the UN’s major peacekeeping operations. Along with long-established contributors of personnel to UN operations, the P-3 also shared a marked readiness to take action in response to violent conflicts of an internal kind, and to justify such action on normative and humanitarian grounds. P-3 dominance was also, however, a function of the weakness and domestic preoccupation of others. Russia, having assumed the Soviet Union’s permanent seat in the Security Council in 1991, remained in a position of relative weakness throughout the 1990s, dependent as she was on currying favours and maintaining good relations with Western powers and creditors. The Chinese Communist Party for its part was dealing with the aftermath of Tiananmen Square, seeking to rebuild legitimacy by harnessing the forces of nationalism and promoting economic growth. Throughout the 1990s the focus on economic development and rapid growth were also the chief priorities for those powers who, alongside China and Russia, would soon be grouped under the heading of ‘emerging powers’: India, Brazil and South Africa.

As far as the involvement in post-Cold War peacekeeping under UN auspices was concerned, there was a further reason why Western powers were able to set the agenda and drive policy: they were major contributors of both troops and civilian police to UN operations. In January 1995, a combination of nine ‘Western’ countries – France, the UK, Canada, Poland, Netherlands, Norway, Denmark, Spain and Sweden – provided just over 21,000 troops out of a grand total of 63,500.1 All nine countries ranked among the top 20 troop contributors to UN

operations. Most of these troops were deployed in complex missions arising out of internal conflicts and were aimed at addressing humanitarian emergencies and the legacies of protracted internecine warfare. While, as noted above, difference over policies existed among Western powers in relation to individual conflicts, they all supported the broad premises of the 'New Interventionism', notably that violent conflict within the domestic jurisdiction of States, especially when it involved widespread humanitarian suffering, was a source of legitimate international concern justifying external intervention, whether in a peacekeeping capacity or, in extremis, by coercive force.

This commitment to the 'New Interventionism' was evident in their response to the peacekeeping catastrophes of 1994 and 1995. The genocide in Rwanda and the massacre in Srebrenica resulted, after a period of soul-searching and retrenchment in UN peacekeeping lasting from 1995 to 1999, in a series of notable reports that were partly about 'learning lessons', but that also entrenched the normative shift espoused predominantly by Western liberal democracies since the end of the Cold War. The Srebrenica and Rwanda reports2 offered a detailed record of the UN's actions in both places, and the 'Brahimi Report' sought to distil them into lessons for future UN peace operations.3 Also in 1999, the Security Council, for the first time, met specifically to discuss 'the protection of civilians in armed conflict', and since then nearly every new peacekeeping operation launched has included the 'protection of civilians' in its mandate.4 Intrusive and complex operations, undertaken within the jurisdiction of a member state and responding in part or wholly to a humanitarian need or emergency, were clearly not a thing of the past. They would continue, but would not again be allowed to fail as they had with such catastrophic consequences earlier in the decade. The focus of agreement here was plainly more on the 'ends' than the precise 'means' of responding to future crises. Still, there was much praise from Western powers when secretary-general Kofi Annan, in a much-quoted speech not long after NATO's intervention in Kosovo, told the General Assembly that "strictly traditional notions of sovereignty can no longer do justice to the aspirations of peoples everywhere to attain their fundamental freedoms".5

The culmination of this normative push in favour of relaxing the sanctity of the linked principles of sovereignty and non-intervention is widely held to be the endorsement by the UN General Assembly of the 'responsibility to protect' (R2P) in 2005. In the 'Outcome Document' of the UN World Summit that year, Member States agreed in principle to take collective action, "including under Chapter VII, should peaceful means be inadequate and national authorities manifestly [be] failing to protect their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity".6

A Deceptive Consensus

It is important to stress that none of the developments sketched above meant that the normative shift driving the 'New Interventionism' was welcomed without misgivings by emerging powers, let alone by Russia and China. Russian deference and Chinese lack of involvement in Council affairs, in the 1990s in particular, never reflected a deeper harmony of interests among Council members, let alone a normative convergence around 'solidarist values'. This became clear over the Kosovo crisis in 1999, when the prospect of Chinese and Russian opposition to NATO's course of action prompted the P-3 to proceed without explicit authorisation for the use of force. Their decision to act without seeking or waiting for Security Council authorisation was, ultimately, also a measure of Russian and Chinese impotence in the face of Western determination to act. This ability to 'impose its vision' would diminish sharply over the following decade.

What Has Changed?

Looking back from the vantage point of 2013, two sets of developments since the Kosovo operation have produced a situation very different from the 1990s as far as the West's ability to set the agenda and impose its vision are concerned.

The Realignment of Power Relationships within the Security Council

The first of these is a notable change in the dynamics of Security Council politics resulting from the greater assertiveness displayed by Russia and China as permanent members, evident especially since 2007. A symbolically important moment in this regard was the double veto cast by Russia and China (the first since 1972) on a non-binding resolution concerning the human rights situation in Myanmar in January 2007. Coming at the very start of Ban Ki-moon's first term as secretary-general it was an important marker, significant for two reasons, both of them clearer now than they were at the time. On the one hand, it showed that political and economic developments inside Russia and China now permitted both powers to reassert, in a more self-confident and vigorous fashion, their claims to Great Power status. On the other hand, the reasons given for the double veto showed that both powers were also anxious to reaffirm the sanctity of the rule of non-intervention and resist further pressure for it to be subordinated to the provisions of the Charter concerning the promotion of justice, especially when this entailed the prospect of more assertive (and Western-led) action in defence of human rights.

Taken together these developments pointed to fault lines and tensions in the Security Council that have become more acute during Ban Ki-moon's term in office. Thus, in July 2008 Russia and China used the veto again, this time on a draft resolution that would have imposed an arms embargo, along with travel and financial restrictions, on President Robert Mugabe and his closest associates. In doing so, Russia insisted it was only countering "illegitimate and dangerous attempts to [...] 'unbalance' the whole UN system" by taking the "Council beyond its Charter prerogatives of maintaining international
peace and security. Such sentiments have been and remain widely shared by emerging powers, as evidenced by the heated discussions over the responsibility to protect following NATO’s action in Libya in 2011; an operation formally undertaken to protect civilians but ending with the fall of Gaddafi’s regime. Although no veto was cast, the implementation of the relevant resolution authorising “all necessary measures [...] to protect civilians” left not just Russia and China but also emerging powers resentful and troubled “about how R2P might be enforced, by whom, and under whose authority.” Brazil provided an accurate summary of their views in November 2011: “There is a growing perception that the concept of the responsibility to protect might be misused for purposes other than protecting civilians, such as regime change.”

Since official or declaratory statements rarely provide an adequate or reliable guide to deeper motivations, it is worth pausing to assess what to make of the divisions that were brought into such sharp relief over Libya.

The positions taken with respect to the sanctity of the non-intervention rule are, of course, neither new nor surprising; nor should they necessarily be dismissed out of hand as evidence of a mere ‘double-standard’. Both the ‘New Interventionism’ promoted by liberal Western democracies and, in particular, the doctrine of pre-emption adopted by the US in the aftermath of 9/11 generated genuine and, prima facie, justifiable concerns that humanitarian emergencies would come to be used by the West as pretexts for more self-serving military interventions, framed as ‘humanitarian interventions’ or as a responsibility to protect. In this respect, the positions advanced especially by the emerging powers, Brazil, India and South Africa, are not devoid of merit and need to be taken seriously.

It would be entirely wrong, however, to view Russian and Chinese positions (and their growing assertiveness on the Council) merely as a principled defence of the Charter and its order-related provisions. As always, decisions reflect an admixture of motives. Some of these are specific to the issue at hand. In the current case of Syria, for example, Russia’s commercial and military ties to Bashar al-Assad’s regime are long-standing and not irrelevant to the stance taken. But other motives are of a more general nature and two of these, as indicated above, have played an increasingly important role both for Russia and China: first, a power-political determination to assert their Great Power status; and, second, a fundamental disagreement about the extent to which massive violations of human rights demand an international reaction and response. The second of these motives has received less attention than the first, in part because it cannot easily be inferred from official statements or from the language used in Security Council debates. This does not mean that the disagreement is not both real and profound. It is also one that will continue to divide the Council.

Western Contributions to Peacekeeping, Austerity and the Afghan Syndrome

As noted above, a second set of developments has further reduced the ability of the West to impose its vision on other powers and groupings, especially with respect to peacekeeping. One of these is the simple fact that the Western contribution to peacekeeping has been substantially reduced since it peaked in the mid-1990s, while emerging powers have become significant contributors in their own right. In early 2013, the aforementioned group of Western troop contributors provided just over 2,000 out of a grand total of 93,000, and none of them were ranked among the top 20 contributors. By contrast, India, Brazil and South Africa are now all major contributors to UN operations. Even when Western powers have made significant contributions to UN peacekeeping operations – as in Sierra Leone in 2000 and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in 2003 – they have chosen to act outside the UN chain of command.

Added to this are now also the effects of austerity and financial pressures on defence expenditures in most Western countries, specifically on the availability of troops and capabilities for sustained expeditionary deployments. Whether there is much interest in such deployments, however, is another and final factor that is likely to influence the West’s ability to drive events in the way it did in the early post-Cold War years. The extended deployment in Afghanistan has had a sobering impact on those who in the past may have been inclined to support ambitious peacekeeping or peace operations (nearly all of the nine countries listed above have made substantial contributions to NATO’s mission in Afghanistan over the past decade). There is, simply put, much less of an appetite today than in the late 1990s for entering into extended or open-ended engagements. The preference instead is for limiting commitments, as seen in growth of UN ‘political missions’ and in the penchant for offering enabling capabilities (i.e. logistics and intelligence support), thus avoiding a large footprint on the ground. In cases where actual involvement of Western forces is required or cannot be avoided, pressure has been for a speedy transfer of responsibilities to local forces, regional groupings or (as the French are pushing for in Mali) a UN force drawn from the new generation of non-Western troop-contributors.

Concluding Thoughts: The Continued Utility of the United Nations and the Instrumentality of Peacekeeping

For those inclined to write off the UN and the instrumentality of peacekeeping, it is always worth reminding oneself of U Thant’s perceptive words, penned in his memoires: “great problems usually come to the United Nations because governments have been unable to think of anything else to do about...”
The number of troops and civilians deployed on UN mission remains higher today than at any point during the early 1990s. And while not all of these belong to Thant’s category of ‘great problems’, for which the UN is sometimes a convenient dumping ground, the French desire to see a UN force deployed to Mali after its own withdrawal offers but one classic example of the UN’s continuing utility to member states. There is a further reason why the UN is likely to continue to be called upon. The reputational damage suffered by NATO and Western powers in Afghanistan and Iraq has also underscored one of the UN’s most useful attributes: its ability to bestow legitimacy on the claims and actions of its member states (however much those states also continue to bemoan the organisation’s inefficiencies and shortcomings).

It is also worth stressing that the end of the ‘P-3 era’ does not mean a simple return to the Cold War power politics at the UN. Indeed, although Russia and China have exercised the veto jointly on several occasions since 2007, there is no reason to suppose, and history certainly does not support such a supposition, that they are locked in a permanent embrace based on a commonality of interest and outlook. Similarly, for all the attention given to the BRICS as an increasingly co-ordinated and semi-institutionalised ‘counterweight to the West’ on the world stage, beneath the surface, genuine and often profound divisions exist among them, including, most obviously, between the forms of government they espouse. This means that on many issues, including ones related to the establishment and support of UN peacekeeping, it will most likely be possible to find agreement across the sometimes overworked division between ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’.

For all this, it is clear that reaching consensus on issues of international security in the Council, especially if it involves considerations of coercive measures and defence of human rights, have become and are likely to remain fraught. While this is a source of regret to many, it should not come as a surprise. There was a sense in much of the early writing on the prospects for a revitalised UN after the Cold War that ‘power politics’ could or was about to be transcended. What the period since has shown is that even in the 1990s power politics never disappeared. This is not necessarily a counsel of despair. In the words of Hans Morgenthau, an academic long out of fashion and rarely quoted for his insights these days, in a multistate world divided over issues of interest and values, “we cannot escape the temptation and liabilities of power politics by an act of will. We must learn to live with them and still remain civilized; that is, we must make the best of them. Yet even at best, we cannot afford to forget that they are ever with us”.

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