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UN Security Council's failure stretches from Syria to Crimea

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Lights are on, but no-one's home. Patrick Gruban, CC BY-SA

The crisis in Ukraine, as Russian troops apparently occupy Crimea and threaten its borders with the rest of the country, has sent strong tremors through the international diplomatic community. Both Barack Obama and Angela Merkel have made lengthy phone calls to Vladimir Putin to urge restraint, and to make him aware of “consequences” if Ukraine’s sovereignty isn’t respected.

As to what consequences Russia’s military incursion into Crimea may have, we cannot yet be sure. There is talk of **boycotting the G8 meeting** in Sochi later this year; there is also talk of **expelling Russia from the G8 altogether** in favour of a G7. Meanwhile, the EU’s high representative for foreign affairs, Catherine Ashton, is **heading to Ukraine** this week. EU sanctions are being discussed, and the IMF will visit Kiev to discuss a financial aid package to the interim government.

But what of the United Nations? What action can the UN take to help defuse the situation? To get a sense of whether or not the UN can achieve anything, we only have to look to Syria – where, after three years, a nightmarish conflict still rages at a cost of more than 140,000 people killed, millions exiled, and millions more internally displaced.

There are numerous other examples of conflicts shaped by the military interventions of the US or Russia: Iraq, Afghanistan, Nicaragua, Chile, Iran, Vietnam and Kosovo, to name a few. The UN has been spectacularly unable to deal with those as well. At the heart of its failing are the organisation’s power structure, and the problem of enforcing member states’ accountability to international law – and the institutional failings of the UN Security Council (UNSC).

The UNSC is one of the principal organs of the UN, whose powers exercised through its

Resolutions are legally binding among all UN members. It is also dominated by the Big Five permanent members: the US, the UK, France, Russia and China. Any of these can veto a resolution tabled in UNSC, and the council's ability to maintain peace and security therefore depends upon their interests – and not necessarily the concerns of those directly affected by conflicts and wars.

So the US continues to veto any resolution that condemns Israel's actions in Palestine, while Russia similarly vetoes any resolution that involves intervening in Syria against its client Bashar al-Assad.

The UN was established in 1945 to prevent a third world war, and in this at least it has been successful. But in recent years, it has been unable to prevent a number of major conflicts and millions of casualties. Many of these conflicts have involved members of the UNSC – in the case of Iraq, for example, the US and Britain. The UN could not block that intervention, and it would probably have been bypassed had the UK parliament voted for military intervention in Syria. The fact is, irrespective of the nature and scale of conflict, the power structure of the UN prevents joint decisions on the most pressing and immediate issues if the interests of any Big Five clash.

Bypasses and violations

Another problem with the UN is the ratification of subsidiary bodies such as the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which has ramifications for the legal accountability of member states. Chapter XIV of the UN Charter authorises the UNSC to enforce ICJ rulings, but this is still subject to the veto power of the five permanent members of the Council. Which means we are back where we started if any of the Big 5 is involved. When you add US's refusal to recognise the ICJ or the ICC, this renders those bodies meaningless.

Despite this, the US has recently criticised Russia's moves in Ukraine for being in breach of international law, including Russia's obligations under the UN Charter, and of its 1997 military basing agreement with Ukraine.

The UN's inability to reach a solution for peace in Syria and also the entire Middle East peace process is widely exposed. The ascendancy of Palestine as an "observer state" after getting overwhelming support in the General Assembly of the UN has already shown the existing differences in the institution at large. Immediately after UNESCO recognised Palestine as its newest member, the US stopped its funding to the organisation – but it still has only haltingly reassessed its aid to Egypt after the military coup there. Any resolutions to bring Israel to the ICC for war crimes committed in Gaza, or to stop it from building more settlements on Palestinian land, are blocked by the US on a regular basis.

Thorough reforms of the UN, especially the UNSC, could work towards better international governance and maintenance of peace and security in the world, but they can only work if the Big Five are ready to give up their veto and engage in more democratic power-sharing. Timid reforms, such as including more non-permanent members in the UN for two year periods, are not going to help in the long run: countries elected as non-permanent members to the UNSC can vote on a resolution, but the permanent members can still veto it. And while other subsidiary bodies of the UN continue to work and engage in development work around the world, these have acted as a veil to hide the ineffectiveness of the UN in the areas of global governance.

The world needs a truly legitimate international organisation that serves the needs of those affected by conflicts directly, and not the interests of the power-hungry nations who run the show. This can only be achieved when there are serious diplomatic efforts to make the

UNSC a truly “one member, one vote” system, serving the interests of all nations.