DIPLOMATIC FALLOUT: WHY THE INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM IS STILL WORTH FIGHTING FOR

RICHARD GOWAN

The multilateral security system is stumbling around the world as it suffers from major structural weaknesses. Yet elements of it have worked surprisingly well in the current set of crises, from documenting atrocities in Syria to mediating in Ukraine. Despite setbacks, a mix of international officials and observers, soldiers and governments remain willing to stand up for the vulnerable and uphold that system.

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By Richard Gow
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“*The System Worked.*” That is the title of a new book by Daniel W. Drezner reviewing the role of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and World Trade Organization in the global financial crisis. Although the world economy tanked in 2008, Drezner argues, multilateral organizations helped save it from collapse.

It is unlikely that anyone will write a book about the current wars in the Middle East and Ukraine with a similar title. A pithy summary of the United Nations’ rifts over Syria or NATO’s inability to halt Russia from seizing Crimea could be “the system flopped.” While the U.N. Security Council passed a resolution last week targeting the Islamic State, initially known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), it was a belated response to a threat that has been all too clear for months.

The U.N. is struggling to make its presence felt elsewhere. Also last week, Security Council ambassadors emerged from a visit to South Sudan “annoyed and angry,” according to the British representative, after “rather disappointing” meetings with its leaders. Such understatement belied the situation on the ground. Eight months after the country fell into chaos, U.N. troops are still protecting nearly 100,000 South Sudanese civilians on their bases. Famine is looming. But the U.N., the U.S. and South Sudan’s neighbors have all failed to engineer a lasting peace deal.

It is not hard to see why the multilateral security system is stumbling around the world. It suffers structural weaknesses at three levels. The major powers at the apex of the system are in disarray, as the U.S. tries to limit its global commitments and China and Russia assert themselves. Middle-sized powers that want to undercut the system are exploiting these top-tier tensions: While Moscow and Washington have sparred over Syria at the U.N., for example, Saudi Arabia and Iran have fought a proxy war on the ground.

At the bottom of the global ladder, a mix of predatory governments, rebel movements and terrorists have taken advantage of the troubles higher up. As I noted at the start of this year, embattled and autocratic leaders from Syria’s Bashar al-Assad to South Sudan’s Salva Kiir have concluded that they can have more to gain from using force against their foes than submitting to international mediation. In the Middle East and North Africa, groups such as the Islamic State are profiting from the resulting conflicts.

There is no shortage of potential responses to these problems. American hawks, as I discussed last week, claim that tougher U.S. policies could help restore order. Both internationalist doves and hard-nosed realists believe that some form of “grand bargain” with Russia, China or both is necessary to maintain the overall security system in the longer term. International technocrats hope that less dramatic reforms can strengthen the system from below. The U.N. Secretariat is, for example, setting up a much needed if complex review of how peacekeeping operations work.

While all these options are topics for impassioned—and occasionally even informed—debates among foreign policy specialists, it is worth noting that some elements of the multilateral system have worked surprisingly well in the current set of crises.
These comparatively high performers include many of those tasked with speaking truth to power in a period in which the details of many conflicts are in dispute. U.N. human rights experts, for example, have played a significant role since 2011 in accumulating evidence of atrocities in Syria, and more recently in sifting through conflicting accounts of abuses in Ukraine. Earlier this month, one senior U.N. official told the Security Council that “a reign of fear and terror” prevails in areas in eastern Ukraine controlled by pro-Russian armed groups. Such statements, tempered by warnings to the Ukrainian authorities over their own behavior, publicly disprove Moscow’s case that the separatists are merely defending their communities from persecution.

Officials from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) have played a substantial part in monitoring events in eastern Ukraine, even though a number of its personnel have been held as hostages. The latest international organization to become embroiled in the crisis is the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), which is mediating over aid deliveries. Moscow has tried to hijack the ICRC, falsely claiming it gave its blessing for a huge “humanitarian” convoy that Western leaders warned could be a cover for invasion. But Red Cross officials have challenged Moscow’s ploy by insisting on “strict accordance with our fundamental working principles of neutrality, impartiality and independence.”

Neither the U.N., the ICRC nor the OSCE have found, or are likely to find, the ultimate political solution to the Ukrainian crisis. Yet they have at least managed to counter some of the rumors and lies surrounding the fighting and maintain some channels for more civil discussions.

Of course, that is of little consolation to those in the middle of the conflict. It remains possible that international officials’ findings may one day help hold those guilty of brutality in Ukraine to account. U.N. experts have not merely catalogued atrocities in Syria but, crucially, drawn up a confidential list of some of the worst alleged perpetrators. But there is no guarantee that anyone will face justice in either case. Multilateral institutions and their representatives may ultimately do little more than defend the idea of some basic human decency in the middle of war.

Weak as that may sound, this residual sense of decency has inspired other international actors to more concrete efforts in recent crises. These range from the U.N.’s decision to protect those tens of thousands of civilians on its bases in South Sudan, despite threats to its troops, to U.S. President Barack Obama’s decision earlier this month to launch air strikes in northern Iraq to stop the Islamic State from slaughtering the Yazidi minority trapped on Sinjar Mountain.

In a period in which the multilateral security system is under strain, there is some comfort in the fact that a mix of international officials and observers, soldiers and governments remain willing to stand up for the vulnerable and do what they can to uphold that system. Perhaps the system hasn’t completely flopped in recent crises. A fairer if less pithy assessment might be that the system is indeed failing, but it still does enough good to be worth fighting for. □

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Photo: United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay meets with South Sudan’s former Vice President and now rebel leader Riek Machar at an undisclosed location in South Sudan, April 29, 2014 (AP photo by UNMISS).

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