

The Dissonant Concert: US-Russian Relations in the UN Security Council

Kimberly Marten Zisk
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Bernard College, Columbia University

How can we best understand the ambiguous relationship between the United States and Russia in the United Nations today? On the one hand, their debates and disagreements are heated, and the two sides' definitions of their own national interests are often incompatible. Yet meetings of the UN Security Council (UNSC) are held almost daily, the meetings often focus on very sensitive issues, and the use of the veto by either country remains rare. This contrasts markedly with how the UNSC operated during the Cold War, when it often met less than once a month because no one could think of a reason to convene a meeting, and when vetoes by both the US and USSR were common.

It is important to understand the complexity of this relationship in order to make predictions about how US-Russian relations are likely to evolve in the future. I argue that the reason why both Russia and the US continue to turn to the UNSC is not that they necessarily seek multilateral resolutions to difficult international security issues. Such a quest would be quixotic, given the complexity of the world situation today and the differences in the two countries' national interests. Instead their major goal is to keep the lines of communication between them open, and to avoid driving either side into unilateralist diplomatic isolation.

This pattern will continue as long as diplomats from both sides have a relatively free rein to pursue cooperation, and as long as both sides see some benefit from their relationship. It will likely change if Russian domestic nationalism continues to grow, and Russian leaders become unable to explain the value of Western ties to their public. We caught a glimpse of the potential power of this nationalism when the Kosovo crisis was at its peak, and Western embassies and consulates in Russia were attacked by angry citizens. NATO leaders should remain conscious of the potential for this fury to increase, and should recognize that Russian diplomatic flexibility may be limited as a consequence.

The UNSC Today

Russia and the United States have maintained a remarkable willingness to use the UNSC as a forum for resolving contentions between them on international security issues. Despite strong disagreement with current UN economic sanctions policy against Iraq, for example, Russia has for the most part upheld those sanctions. It has done so despite pressure from various provincial governors, especially the leaders of the Russian

Republic of Tatarstan, to break the sanctions regime. Similarly, in June 1999, it was surprising to many observers how easy it was to gain Russian approval for Resolution 1244 on Kosovo (demanding Serbian withdrawal from Kosovo and approving the Chapter 7 deployment of the NATO-led KFOR peace enforcement mission), without any obvious major Western concession, economic or otherwise, to Russia.

If it were merely Russia who always gave in to the United States, one might think that the power differential between the two countries alone explained the pattern. Russia might not gain immediate concessions for its acquiescence, yet arguably might feel that in the long term it could not afford to have the US as an enemy. But this alone does not accurately describe the situation. For all the concern about US and NATO unilateral action in the airstrikes against Serbia and Kosovo this past spring, for example, the US and its French and British allies continued to participate in often uncomfortable multilateral UNSC meetings, where loud objections to these policies were repeatedly raised by Russia and China. It was, after all, a UN resolution that was necessary to end the war, since otherwise Russia would never have helped gain Serbian acquiescence to NATO occupation of Kosovo. And despite continuing unilateral US and British airstrikes against Iraq, both countries continue to approach the UNSC in hopes that a multilateral resolution to the Iraqi sanctions problem can be reached, seeing such agreement as the best way to ensure that some kind of international pressure against Iraq continues. One would not think a unilateralist superpower would feel obligated to subject itself to such discomfort, or to waste diplomatic resources on a process it believed to be futile.

Given that the United States does not feel constrained from taking unilateral action on behalf of its own interests, however, US behavior is probably not based on any idealist notion about what multilateral agreements can accomplish. And given that the Russian state has also acted unilaterally, for example in its tacit support for weapons and parts sales from Russian territory that violate the Missile Technology Control Regime, or in approving the early deployment of Russian troops to the Pristina airport in contravention of the agreement it reached with NATO, Russia, too, is clearly not supporting multilateralism for its own sake. Instead both sides use multilateral fora as tools to restrain the other side whenever possible, and to keep their diplomatic relationship functioning.

Diplomatic Complexity and Popular Opinion

This diplomatic maneuvering is not something that is easily explained to the general public. While in the United States the UN is regarded benignly enough that no major change in strategy is likely, Russia is a different case. We saw this past spring how easily Russian popular anger could be ignited against the US and NATO. Certainly complaints have been growing in Russia that the UN is merely a shell for US world dominance, and that Russian diplomats have become too soft. The abstract benefits obtained from cooperation with the West may decline in importance for Russian leaders facing increasing domestic unrest.

At the moment it is hard to predict what Russian diplomacy will look like after the upcoming presidential elections. Even if a centrist coalition wins and is willing to cooperate with the United States for the sake of potential future economic and diplomatic benefits, the leeway diplomats have for such activity may become increasingly limited. If popular discontent with Russia's economic failures and deteriorating internal security situation becomes strong enough, the West may lose whatever diplomatic leverage it maintains with Russia today, especially in the event of another incident that highlights Russian international impotence and NATO disregard for Russian interests.

US and NATO leaders must therefore evaluate carefully what the loss of Russian cooperation in the UN Security Council might entail for future Western interests. Russia may be weak, but the weapons it can still supply to regimes such as Iraq and Serbia if UN sanctions are ignored should carry weight in US and NATO calculations. Above all, the US and NATO should avoid additional military entanglements in areas viewed by Russians as being in their traditional sphere of influence.

While Russian popular concerns today may not be focused on foreign affairs, it will not take much for the passions of the average Russian to reignite in an anti-Western direction. If that occurs again, the US may find itself facing Russian diplomats who are politically incapable of continuing an American partnership. At that point, the UNSC will revert to its Cold War character, and the hope for multilateral unity against rogue regimes may disappear for good.

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