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## The Future of UN Mediation, Peacebuilding, Sanctions, and Special Envoys

### Major Highlights and Recommendations

*January 17, 2019*

**Overview:** An initiative of Stimson, the United Nations Association of the National Capital Area (UNA-NCA), the Alliance for Peacebuilding, and the United States Institute of Peace, the roundtable brought together former and current U.S. government and UN officials, scholars, policy analysts, activists, and practitioners to discuss the UN's experience, over the past decade, with mediation, peacebuilding, sanctions, and special envoys.

The dialogue highlighted the first-hand experience of two American former UN Under-Secretaries-General for Political Affairs – Lynn Pascoe and Jeff Feltman – who led the UN Department of Political Affairs (DPA), now the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA). Victoria Holt (Stimson Distinguished and former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for International Organization Affairs) moderated the dialogue. They spoke about their insights from major country and regional engagements, lessons from their diplomatic roles, and considerations for the United States going forward. Broadly, DPPA offers a unique set of tools (e.g., mediation, conflict analysis, sanctions), international reach (e.g., broad agenda, leadership of Special Political Missions, and field-based Peace and Development Advisors), and experience to international peacemaking and peacebuilding. However, that role is lesser known in Washington, D.C. and other major capitals.

The discussion also touched on the level of insecurity and international leadership today. At a time when the World Bank estimates that roughly two billion people are affected by fragility, conflict, and violence, UN tools are stressed. Crises in Syria, Yemen, and Libya demonstrate what can happen when there is a lack of unity among major powers in the UN Security Council to resolve a particular crisis situation and the humanitarian consequences. Overall, the event explored five main topics: UN-led mediation, peacebuilding, sanctions, Special Envoys, and reform, giving special attention to the relevance of U.S. foreign policy interests and values in connection with these issues.

## UN Mediation

*International mediation is a crowded playing field, where a well-supported United Nations can make a difference.*

- The UN has fewer resources than one might imagine for a global organization. In recent years, efforts have been made to strengthen political missions, with deployment of a record number of Special Political Missions, as well as Peace and Development Advisors.
- While the UN consults broadly with governments and others with interests or leverage in specific peace and security matters, **the U.S.’ global role ensures that the UN must consider American views and often rely on its capacity** to help manage and resolve nearly all violent conflicts.
- In the area of mediation, the UN can provide a range of different roles of support or leadership (as leadership options in any particular conflict are normally *ad hoc* in nature).
- To be even more effective on mediation, the UN needs to expand its political presence worldwide, and here it will be important to **place these capabilities on the UN’s Regular Budget** (rather than rely on non-core, voluntary resources).

*Conflict prevention is preferred, but that doesn’t mean that it is easy to do.*

- While it is widely recognized that it is better to prevent conflict, that doesn’t mean that success is easy to see. For example, UN efforts in Colombia, Guinea-Bissau, the Gambia, Burkina Faso, and the Republic of Moldova demonstrate mediation and peacebuilding success stories, where diplomatic efforts saved considerable sums of money.
- **The UN is good at mediation, but the demand exceeds the capacity – and the diplomatic pool and support needs to be strengthened.** While most countries recognize that other conflict management tools (e.g., “boots on the ground”) are expensive, that doesn’t mean resources naturally flow to mediation before a crisis.
- The U.S. generally privileges bilateral approaches to international mediation, and today more so. Participants noted that the U.S. will likely turn again toward multilateral approaches (based on a criteria, among other issues, of effectiveness and cost-saving).

*If you want to achieve progress on mediation, work skillfully behind the scenes with UN Member States.*

- Progress with UN mediation often stems from **working with Member States “below the radar.”**
- Guinea and Sierra Leone are mediation and peacebuilding success stories (and fortunately, the UNSC did not micromanage the Secretariat’s mediation activities).
- It is difficult to work towards positive change when there are P5 countries (e.g., Russia) undermining your actions.

*Does the UN maintain sufficient capacities and political support to conduct effective mediation?*

- In 2005, the UN established a Mediation Support Unit within the then Department of Political Affairs. In partnership with UNDP, DPA has deployed more than three dozen Peace and Development Advisers in the field, provides operational support and guidance to the Secretary-General's new High-Level Advisory Board on Mediation, and over the past decade deployed more than 50 different kinds of Special Political Missions around the world. Even with these capacities, **the UN is asked increasingly to play a mediation “support” and “facilitation” role to other lead actors** (e.g., regional and sub-regional organizations).
- Changing dynamics have made conflicts harder to mediate, as have diverging views across members states on and off the Security Council. Brussels and the EU view the world in different ways than the U.S., and this fissure among heretofore allies hampers directly efforts to call upon the UN to mediate a crisis (let alone to provide it adequate political support to ensure success). Where can we point to international mediation success stories in this “period of disruption”?
- Today, the UN is doing a lot of mediation capacity-building with other actors (e.g., vis-à-vis the OSCE in eastern Ukraine), but there is a modest risk that the UN is being asked to mainly play a facilitation/support role and deprioritize its own engagement.
- The UN has successfully brokered local ceasefires, but its strength as a mediator comes, in part, from engaging non-governmental partners effectively. For example, in Libya, the UN Special Envoy, Ghassan Salamé, “subcontracted out” a town hall process to the Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue (HD). HD was able to travel around the country and conduct town halls without the security footprint of the UN and without provoking the locals into talking about what they wanted from the UN (when the point was to get them to talk about what they wanted from their own government). Salamé could then get ideas from across the country and incorporate them into his plan.

## **UN Peacebuilding**

*Support for early warning and action (i.e., conflict prevention and preventive diplomacy) are critical peacebuilding activities of the UN, though they continue to face challenges.*

- Except for its field-based Special Political Missions and regional offices, the UN's Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) does not have a full-time political presence overseas. While called on to anticipate and prevent crises, the DPPA does not have the reach of the US government and its embassies worldwide. DPPA's early warning and action activities, among other core functions, would benefit from more eyes and ears on the ground (in country or, at the very least, at the sub-regional level).
- To gain greater field understanding, DPA (and now DPPA) have worked over the past decade and more to become more operational and to develop more ground-based tools. The Peace and Development Advisers, mentioned above, are shared with UNDP

and provide eyes and ears on the ground in political sensitive areas. DPA/DPPA has expanded its cooperation and liaison relationships with regional and sub-regional organizations. **DPPA might also consider expanding its network of regional offices to have senior-level DPPA representation based full-time in a region or country to build-up both the credibility and institutional knowledge essential to conflict prevention and response to crisis situations** (i.e., similar to the role performed by national embassies today.)

- Better access to local political leaders is critical to success, and DPPA could learn from past examples – such as the UN, AU, and ECOWAS learned from its under-appreciated early warning and action efforts in Burkina Faso.
- For example, the **Security Council can undertake horizon scanning of potential conflicts** (assessing early warning indicators), but countries often resist their own review or that of their allies (i.e., by the DPPA, or other parts of the UN system). Even with monthly briefings on Syria in the Security Council beginning in 2011, for example, the Security Council faced internal divisions that prevented taking joint action.

*Information, intelligence, and analysis support structures for the UN progressed after the end of the Cold War.*

- UN cooperation with Member States can provide rich and timely analysis and information on various situations, and in the 1990s, following different approaches, there seemed to be a higher-level of analysis and information exchange between the UN and major capitals, (with such capabilities) including the United States, as there is today.
- For collaboration of this kind to occur today, **we might want to push for analytical knowledge that everyone (all Member States) can draw upon.** Unfortunately, each time that the UN Secretariat has tried to be proactive in information gathering — Security Council horizon-scanning, periodic “situational awareness” briefings, internal policy meetings and discussions — member state representatives of countries, regions or issues in question raise objections, frequently to the Secretary-General himself. Without adequate UN analytical abilities and situational awareness, non-governmental organizations, such as the International Crisis Group, can sometimes provide Member States with better briefings than the UN.

*When a crisis erupts, sooner or later the question turns to “what does the U.S. think”?*

- In most cases, **UN officials in New York want to know Washington’s perspective**, first and foremost, on a particular conflict (“the U.S. looms large in Turtle Bay,” remarked one participant).
- In general, U.S. Government officials do not seek out the UN’s take on specific crisis as immediately as UN officials express concern for how Americans think. At the same time, the UN doesn’t fully realize the potential of America to contribute to the resolution of a conflict. The U.S. is the only UN Member State that can often times act, act fast, and make a real difference.

*The UN Peacebuilding Architecture and preventive action continue to show promise while facing obstacles.*

- Though not large, the UN Peacebuilding Fund (which on average amounts to a few hundred million dollars at any one time and remains dependent on a small group of donors) is a great if limited mechanism for funding projects, such as building a police station as an element in efforts aimed at calming a conflict zone. In short, the Peacebuilding Fund seeks to link its activities (at least ostensibly) to broader peace and security strategic goals. In theory, it is also designed to facilitate “risk-taking” when no other bilateral and multilateral donors are able or willing to invest in a conflict-affected country.
- With the exception of the strong leadership exercised by the Swiss in Burundi [I believe Switzerland still leads the configuration], **Member State-led Peacebuilding configurations with the PBC have generally been a disappointment, not energizing tangible support for peacebuilding activities in the country of focus and often coming across as patronizing to the host country and UN field-based staff.**
- The U.S. often struggled to understand what the Peacebuilding Commission was trying to achieve in concrete terms. Was it all about supporting non-state actors and long-term enterprise?
- Everyone loves the idea of prevention and bringing people together in support of Sustainable Development Goal #16 (promoting peaceful societies). In practice, what this means is that Member States support development, inclusivity, prosperity, and other elements of a healthy, peaceful society. This long-term prevention focus is non-controversial, even if there are often shortfalls in resources. But there are times when prevention requires urgent political intervention with those in a country or region who have the influence to provoke conflicts. Amidst accusations of “interference,” the consensus favoring long-term prevention breaks down when immediate conflict prevention efforts are needed.
- The World Bank-United Nations’ recent *Pathways for Peace* report offers some innovative and common-sense recommendations for preventive action. However, officials in the Office of the Secretary-General were initially reluctant to embrace these proposed measures because Member States had not first “signed-on” nor did the UN possess a “legislative mandate” to pursue this new direction.

## **UN Sanctions**

*Sanctions remain an important, but less understood, part of the work of the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs*

- The UN sanctions committees are supported by independent groups and panels of experts, who are supported by the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs and report directly to the Security Council.

- Information from experts' reports, however, is not easily shared with UN Secretariat officials or member states not serving on the Security Council. That approach limited the use of the experts' analysis and recommendations.
- Consideration of better integrating Council expert reports and findings into longer-term conflict prevention, peacebuilding and mediation measures could be more effective.
- The United States brought great attention to non-proliferation sanctions regimes, especially those focuses on Iran and DPRK.
- Sanctions in Africa often were co-concurrent with UN-led peacekeeping missions, and had more direct relevance for the political strategies in those countries (e.g., DRC, Somalia, Liberia, Cote D'Ivoire, Darfur, etc.) Those regimes seemed to get less high-level attention.
- Especially with the increase in sanctions regimes against nuclear proliferation and terrorist financing, the Council needs to make sure that **the U.S. and other UN Member States follow through on their pledges and commitments.**

### **UN Special Envoys**

*A major problem facing Special Envoys is the "Programmatic Structure" of a field-oriented Special Political Mission*

- **To be successful, a Special Envoy needs to attract funding for at least a five-year period.** But, as shared by one respected Special Envoy from a recent UN field mission, it is impossible to achieve the equivalent of two generations worth of change in only five years.
- Given the growth in Special Political Missions over the past decade, by 2017, 40% of the then Department of Political Affairs' budget came from voluntary contributions (including a small USD \$600,000 contribution from the U.S.).
- However great a host country's needs might be, Special Envoys should avoid taking on unrealistic and overly ambitious developmental projects in tight time-frames (e.g., rebuilding a host country's education system).

*Special Envoys, including the heads of UN peace operations, bring value to the US Government through their periodic visits to Washington.*

- In addition to their briefings in the Security Council, **UN Special Envoys can provide American policy-makers uniquely grounded, field-based perspectives on a fragile and conflict-affected country/region.** The U.S. can, in turn, often provide critical new/additional information on security issues.

## UN Reform

*Participants explored both new (and old) approaches to early warning monitoring.*

- One idea floated was to conduct **intensive reviews on a region — on a monthly basis** — by Member State representatives themselves, as a parallel effort to the UN’s existing internal Regional Quarterly Reviews. Member States could use timely analysis provided by DPPA to ask each representative, for example “what do we see about country X?” For instance, despite the likely pushback, it might have made sense to hold this type of regional review prior to Kenya’s latest, somewhat unstable elections.

*The Security Council, with analysis and advice provided by the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, needs to regularly reiterate to countries the case for coming before it, including the need to avert a larger crisis.*

- DPPA and the Security Council need new tools, including more effective ways of communicating, to gain Member States support for early action to prevent a crisis from accelerating. We need a strategy for better understanding states that are potentially vulnerable to political violence and terrorist activities, drawing on the best information and analysis available from within the UN system, Members States, and from capable non-governmental actors.
- Colombia provides a useful example, as the UN was not the key player. Rather, by providing best practices (when asked) and targeted monitoring and reintegration assistance, **the UN was recognized for contributing to confidence-building in niche areas**, within the context of Colombia’s broader peacebuilding and disarmament efforts.

*The worst part of the United Nations is its management.*

- America’s hyper-focus on ensuring that the United Nations does not cost too much money (and “doing more with less”) has **come at the expense of investing in better management practices across the UN system.**
- Change management is difficult to implement within the UN because its leaders are too intransigent. Expressing hope for real change, participants noted the management reform proposed by Secretary-General Guterres and currently being implemented. Real change will come from someone willing to do “the dirty work”.
- Given its ability to exert pressure and leadership elsewhere, the U.S. could expend capital on this reform without leading the UN Department of Management (e.g., at the expense of leading another, arguably more important, department such as DPPA, where the Under-Secretary-General wields more authority to take action).
- **Where the UN is more field oriented, it can add real value.** For the United Nations to remain relevant, it must be able to go beyond a capital city and really engage people within a fragile and conflict-affected country setting. Too often, missions lack resources to take this approach.

## Concluding/General Points

*The U.S.-UN relationship is vital to advancing U.S. values and interests, and it requires careful nurturing and respect for having Americans in senior UN posts.*

- **In serving as an interpreter of US policy for senior UN leadership**, American diplomats acting as the UN Under-Secretary-General for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs, and other critical roles across the UN system, are in America's best interest (e.g., being well-positioned to advise the Secretary-General in saying "This is how that they might look at this issue in Washington" or "This is how you might convince the U.S.>").
- Sometimes it is difficult for senior American policy-makers to notice that there are myriad competing interests among UN Member States on any given policy issue. Policy-makers in Washington should think strategically about how we can employ the UN and other international organizations better to advance American values and policy goals.
- **U.S. policy-makers should be planning for where the US should be in the next 25 years in a multilateral world** (*admittedly, something Washington doesn't like to do*).
- With three Ambassadors focused almost exclusively on the Security Council, with only one each focused on management and budgets issues and the Economic and Social Council, respectively, the current and previous U.S. Administrations continue to give too much weight to the Security Council.
- Another participant lamented that the United Nations doesn't really exist in the Department of Defense's (DoD) world; rather, the DoD cares about NATO.
- While America diplomats participate in big debates that attempt to measure successes and failures of the United Nations, **they, on the whole, still do not possess adequate knowledge about the UN**, such as its actual costs, overall impact, and true worth in terms of advancing vital U.S. values and interests.

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