

Russia's Security Council Diplomacy and the Middle East

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Abstract

Moscow values Russia's permanent membership on the UN Security Council for the ability that the veto-power this status gives it to project influence, as well as to deny Security Council approval to actions sought by others—especially the United States. But as Russia's Security Council diplomacy with regard to Iran, Libya, and Syria has shown, the Security Council can be a highly problematic arena for Russia. Moscow cannot prevent the U.S. and its allies from acting without Security Council authorization. Yet even when Moscow does allow a resolution authorizing the use of force to pass, Russia cannot control how the U.S. and its allies implement it. Finally, blocking passage of a resolution can serve to undermine Russia's influence and prestige instead of enhancing them.

Moscow values its permanent membership on the United Nations Security Council for the opportunity it provides Russia to pursue three aims that are highly important to it. First, it allows Russia to play an important role in shaping the international environment to its liking. Second, the veto power that Security Council permanent membership entails means that Russia can block any resolution of which it disapproves, thus necessitating that all other countries seeking the passage of a resolution obtain Moscow's cooperation in order to do so. Third, and most importantly, it represents international affirmation of Russia's status as a great power.

Despite this, Moscow has sometimes been unable to pursue these three aims successfully. Russia has not always been able to shape the international environment to its liking through the Security Council (indeed, the Security Council as a whole is often unable to do so). In addition, Russia's veto power has been obviated when certain governments—especially the United States—have acted outside the auspices of the Security Council. And when either of these things happens, Russia has not appeared to be the great power that it claims and wants to be seen by others as.

Moscow's Security Council diplomacy *vis-à-vis* Iran, Libya, and Syria has had mixed results. This article will discuss Russia's Security Council diplomacy in each of these three cases in order to elucidate the dilemmas and difficulties they have posed for Moscow's pursuit of its broader goals of shaping the international environment, leveraging its veto-power to obtain cooperation from others, and affirming Russia's status as a great power. As argued below, in each case, Russian diplomacy has succeeded in some areas, and yet failed in others. First, though, something needs to be said about the historical context in which Moscow conducts its contemporary Security Council diplomacy.

Historical Context

In designing the UN Security Council, U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt envisioned that the principal

Allies that had fought against the Axis powers in World War II would use it as a cooperative forum for managing the problems of the post-war world. With the emergence of the Cold War, however, this expectation was soon dashed. Instead, the U.S. and the USSR often acted to block each other's Security Council initiatives through the exercise of their veto power. But since this veto power also allowed each permanent member to block any resolution aimed against it, the U.S. and the USSR both used force on several occasions without seeking Security Council approval, justifying their actions instead on another basis. During the Cold War era, then, the lack of Security Council approval did not prevent the U.S. from intervening in Vietnam and several other countries, nor did it prevent the Soviet Union from intervening in Hungary, Czechoslovakia, and Afghanistan.

Despite their ability to act outside of it with impunity, the Security Council was still important for both American and Soviet diplomacy. Each could use it to delegitimize the other through proposing Security Council resolutions that were popular internationally, but which the other superpower was expected to veto. For example, Moscow would frequently push for Security Council resolutions condemning Israel knowing that America would veto them, but also knowing that doing so would result in widespread condemnation of the U.S. in the Muslim world and beyond.

The low point in the USSR's Security Council diplomacy came in 1950 when Moscow was boycotting it over the refusal of the U.S. and its allies to allow the new Communist government in Beijing to take the place of the defeated Nationalist government at the UN when North Korea invaded South Korea. The U.S. and its allies took advantage of the USSR's absence to pass a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force in response to this, thus increasing the legitimacy of the U.S.-led military response. Not surprisingly, Moscow has never allowed such a situation to arise again.

Even during the Cold War, however, the U.S. and the USSR sometimes acted cooperatively to pass Security Council resolutions aimed at resolving conflict. Two such instances were the passage of Security Council Resolution 242 aimed at resolving the 1967 Arab–Israeli War and Resolution 338 which sought to resolve the 1973 one. Nevertheless, the U.S. was able to exclude the USSR from playing any meaningful role in subsequent American-led Arab–Israeli peace efforts.

The high point of Soviet–American cooperation in the Security Council occurred in the wake of the August 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait when Washington and Moscow worked together to pass numerous resolutions against Iraq—including one authorizing the use of force against it. In the 1990s, though, Moscow came to regret its decision to approve Security Council economic sanctions against Iraq because it could not persuade the US to either lift or reduce them (thus impeding Russia’s ability to openly trade with and invest in Iraq—though it did do so more or less clandestinely).

More recently, Russia’s attempts to prevent the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq in 2003 through the UN Security Council also furnished mixed results. Although Russia—and many other countries—were unable to prevent the U.S. from intervening, their blockage of Security Council approval for this action did serve to delegitimize its actions thus succeeding in isolating the U.S. diplomatically. Wishing to avoid a re-run of the Iraq debacle, the U.S. (under President Bush as well as President Obama) has more recently placed greater emphasis on working within, rather than outside the Security Council in order to achieve its aims.

With this background in mind, we can now proceed to explain Moscow’s recent Security Council diplomacy with regard to Iran, Libya, and Syria.

Iran

Russia’s Security Council diplomacy with regard to Iran has been highly conflicted. On the one hand, Moscow does not want Iran to acquire nuclear weapons. On the other, it also does not want force to be used against Iran either for fear of how this could negatively impact Russian interests. If Tehran believed that Moscow supported an attack against it, it might retaliate against Russia in several ways: supporting Muslim rebels in the North Caucasus, backing Azerbaijan instead of Moscow’s ally Armenia, and ending economic cooperation with Russia. Moscow, then, has no intention of supporting a UN Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iran.

Increasingly, though, political leaders in Israel, the U.S., and elsewhere have been calling for Iran to be forcefully prevented from acquiring nuclear weapons even

without Security Council approval. Moscow opposes this as it could lead to harmful consequences for Russia. At worst, such an attack could lead to the downfall of the current Iranian regime followed by the rise either of a pro-Western one or of a virulently Islamist one hostile to both Russia and the West. Moscow does not want to see either of these developments.

Russia’s approach to the Iranian nuclear issue in the Security Council, then, has been to delay, but then approve the passage of watered-down (from the Western perspective) resolutions imposing increasing economic sanctions on Iran. Tehran has complained bitterly about Russian betrayal whenever Moscow has done this. Moscow, though, may see supporting successive economic sanctions resolutions against Iran as useful not in obtaining Iranian compliance over the nuclear issue (which, so far, has not occurred), but in persuading the U.S. in particular to continue the multilateral diplomatic approach and not abandon it in favour of the use of force against Iran outside the auspices of the Security Council.

If this is indeed the Russian strategy, it has worked fairly well up to now. It has not succeeded, however, in actually resolving the Iranian nuclear crisis. The risk for Moscow is that the more that America, Israel, Europe, and the Arab World feel threatened by the prospect of a nuclear Iran, the more support there will be among them for a forceful approach to Iran that bypasses both the Security Council and Russia.

Libya

At the outset of the Arab Spring in 2011, internal security forces acquiesced to opposition demands for the removal from office of authoritarian rulers who had been in power for decades both in Tunisia and Egypt. In Libya, however, security forces loyal to Qaddafi violently beat back the widespread opposition to him that had sprung up, and appeared to be about to crush it altogether. It was at this point that demands arose both in the West and the Arab World for UN Security Council action to prevent this. Moscow’s initial reaction to these ideas was extremely negative. However, when the Arab League formally called for a Security Council resolution to impose a no-fly zone in Libya to protect the opposition there from annihilation, Russia (and China) abstained on the vote for the measure—thus allowing it to pass.

Almost immediately, though, Moscow began to complain that the U.S. and its NATO and Arab allies were exceeding the provisions of the resolution and actively aiding Libyan oppositionists in their efforts to defeat Qaddafi’s forces, topple his regime, and establish their own government. Much to Moscow’s consternation, America and its allies ignored Russian complaints and

helped the Libyan opposition accomplish each of these tasks. The lesson that the Kremlin learned from this experience is that once a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force has been passed, Moscow cannot do much to control or affect the actions of the U.S. and its allies when they take the lead in implementing such a resolution.

Syria

An Arab Spring-style revolt also erupted in Syria in 2011. Although the opposition there has been unable to topple the Assad regime, the regime has (so far) also been unable to completely crush the opposition. As with Libya, there have been calls—most notably from Saudi Arabia and Qatar—for the UN Security Council to take action to stop the crackdown in Syria. Determined to avoid a repeat of what happened in Libya, however, Russia (in conjunction with China) has this time refused to allow even economic sanctions against Damascus to be authorized by the Security Council.

In one sense, Moscow's Security Council diplomacy *vis-à-vis* Syria has been a success: Russia has blocked the U.S. and others from taking any meaningful action against the Assad regime with the imprimatur of the Security Council. But unlike in 2003 when the blockage by Russia and others of a Security Council resolution authorizing the use of force against Iraq served to delegitimize the subsequent American-led intervention of that country, Moscow's blockage of Security Council measures against the Assad regime has in fact resulted in Russia being seen as responsible for what is happening in

Syria both in the Arab World and the West. (Although China has also blocked Security Council action against the Assad regime, it has not incurred the international opprobrium that Russia has for doing so). The danger for Moscow in taking such an unpopular action is that governments as well as public opinion in other countries will be willing to see the U.S. and others take action in Syria outside the auspices of the Security Council. Should this happen, Russia would not be in a strong position to prevent it.

Conclusion

As the recent Iranian, Libyan, and Syrian cases have shown, Moscow's Security Council diplomacy can face a difficult trade-off. On the one hand, if Russia cooperates with the West and its allies in passing Security Council resolutions that impose sanctions or authorize the use of force, Moscow cannot prevent America and its allies from exceeding what Russia regards as the limits of these resolutions—as occurred with regard to Libya. On the other hand, if Russia blocks Security Council resolutions sought by the West and its allies, it risks bringing down international opprobrium on itself (as occurred with Syria), as well as encouraging others to support action outside Security Council auspices by an American-led “coalition of the willing” (as may yet occur with regard to Syria and Iran). When this is the trade-off Moscow faces, the Security Council is less an arena where Russia can demonstrate that it is still a great power and more one in which its inability to act as one is displayed instead.

About the Author

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