

UNSC Challenges and Opportunities

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is a strategic asset to members despite doubts about its relevance. The Council brings greater legitimacy to members as its purpose is to shape international settings and set the norms on how states should behave. With regard to developing countries and those in conflict, the UNSC is the body in which peace is kept and built. Accordingly, its priority is the stability and reconstruction of states that either cannot or will not do so. While there are arguments to indicate that the Council is flawed in its institution and structure, its actions are ultimately a reflection of the will of its members.

Less or more crisis?

The UNSC — if one were to consider it as a fractious debating chamber — encourages open discussion. Because the Council seeks to administer complex regimes, more dialogue is needed as opposed to statements that do not carry enough weight. The UNSC is ultimately a forum for ideas that influences policy in international peace and security. However, it runs the risk of becoming increasingly marginalised as the post-Cold War world has produced less conflict.

Nonetheless, we are also facing large-scale, intra-regional crises that affect multiple issues simultaneously. For example, the Middle East and North Africa alone have witnessed countless calamities in the last two years (2013–2014). Elsewhere, we have seen humanitarian concerns in the Central African Republic, tension in Ukraine and Crimea, as well as the rise of Ebola.

The rise of non-state actors

The UNSC is especially concerned with the rise of non-state actors (NSA) as a new vector in armed conflicts. Not only do NSA leave a trail of high casualty in their engagements, their blatant disregard for international norms and unconventional strategies have also become such an enormous challenge to the UNSC in fashioning

... NSA leave a trail of high lethality in their engagements, their blatant disregard for international norms and unconventional strategies have also become such an enormous challenge ...



From left: Jon Merrill and Elina Noor



Thomas Daniel



Bunn Nagara

international responses. The last few years have shown sovereign states in the Levant area, particularly Syria, employing NSA to fight their armed struggles. Such conflicts have led to broader regional instability and displaced numerous individuals to surrounding countries. Furthermore, in certain countries where power vacuum prevails — for example, Libya and Yemen — NSA are known to develop a shadow authority and institution which derive support from powerless people, either willingly or unwillingly. At face value, it might seem that the UNSC, with its traditional structure and security paradigm, would find itself in a difficult position to meet this irregular form of threat. However, this kind of uncertainty is exactly what it takes to get the UNSC to reach a consensus because such disproportionate threat endangers the very foundation of sovereign states and the precepts of many established orders. Such a range of crises indicates that the UNSC is not marginalised, but that its permanent members will always be looking to the elected ones to help.

The geostrategic interests of member states are roadblocks to progress within the UNSC as resolutions ultimately derive from consensus.

Competing interests

The geostrategic interests of member states are roadblocks to progress within the UNSC as resolutions ultimately derive from consensus. This cannot be achieved if members have competing interests, or are unprepared to pull their weight equally. For instance, the capacity to enact change is always limited by what members are prepared to do. Issues may also be sidelined according to the interests of big powers, and there are fiscal and normative challenges to consider. There is more pressure on the permanent members of the UNSC (also known as Permanent Five, Big Five, or P5) to increase the costs of peacekeeping as the UN remains fiscally challenged in the current post-financial crisis period. Similarly, managing expectations is difficult as there is little understanding among the public on how the UN actually works, or on the constraints that are placed on the UNSC. These issues put the onus on members to demonstrate that the Council is an effective “captain of hard jobs”. Much more effort is also needed to communicate the work that the UNSC does.

Besides, some of the challenges are not inherently rooted in the clash of opinions among member states. Although the UNSC has managed to pass 90 per cent of its resolutions through consensus, it is fallacious to believe these resolutions could straightforwardly solve the problems they are responding to. Some of these actually established new sets of unintended problems that would drain more energy and



Participants at the forum

resources from the UNSC itself. The example of UNSC Resolution 1973 on military intervention in Libya was raised as it had not only negatively affected the citizens of Libya by removing the power structure, but also portrayed the UNSC as an instrument of regime change as opposed to an organisation charged with the responsibility to protect. This also depicts the difficult position the UNSC is in where it has to continuously uphold international security without infringing the internal business of specific countries. Striking a balance between these two concerns is dilemma.

To reform or not to?

Furthermore there are debates on reforming the Council, whether it is to allow greater democracy so that elected members may leave their mark, or to expand the P5 altogether in the form of new permanent members without veto power. Other suggestions include expanding the number of elected members and establishing a three-tier membership within the UNSC (an additional membership category to the current two). These issues are not without important considerations. Who should initiate a Council reform? Given the inequality in positions between the P5 and elected members, should the UN General Assembly be the one to initiate reform and see the process through? How big do we want the UNSC to be? Indeed, the bigger the Council the longer it will take for resolutions to pass (Resolution 2166 on MH17 took four days). All these concerns indicate that maintaining status quo is preferred over initiating institutional reform, which is likely to generate complex problems.

... maintaining status quo is preferred over initiating institutional reform, which are likely to generate complex problems.

In order for constructive contribution to take place, members should embark on a gap analysis approach. This is to look for realistic opportunities that can strengthen the ways in which the Council does business. These include building bridges or enforcing greater partnerships with other regional organisations, or ensuring that peace missions encompass both peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

A proactive agenda

Malaysia should be ambitious and proactive in the UNSC agenda so as to wrest opportunities from its position in the UNSC. One way to do this is through active framing of the international security narrative according to Malaysia's own national interest. By steering UN member states to undertake collective measures in dealing with international crisis, for example, Malaysia may curtail domestic manifestation

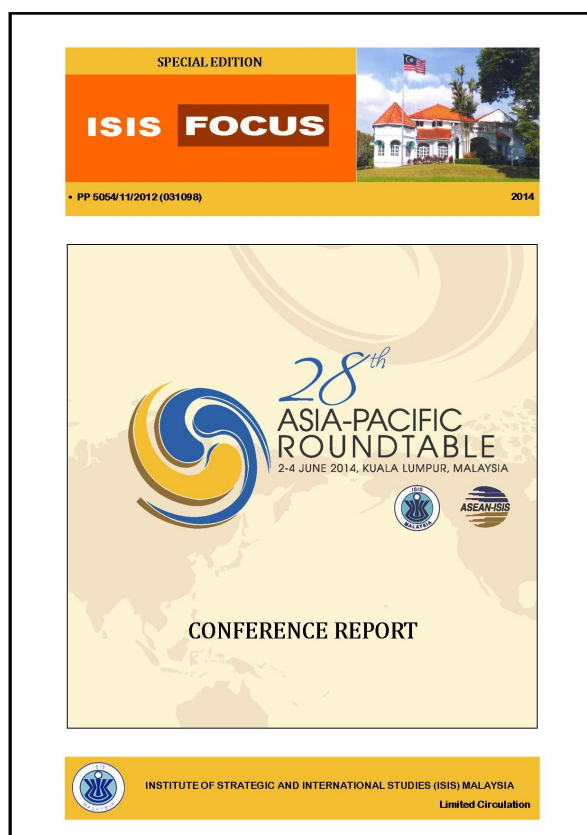
Malaysia should be ambitious and proactive in the UNSC agenda ... through active framing of the international security narrative ...

of such crisis at home. Similarly, active involvement in the UNSC agenda would grant Malaysia technical expertise required to solve particular issues that Malaysia is not familiar with but may face in the future. By being proactive alone, Malaysia would not only meet the demands of its national interest but also win the approval from other member states, especially if the engagements succeed to alleviate the latter's predicament. In turn, higher reputation among international community would allow Malaysia to advance its interest agenda abroad.

Although being on the Council does not substantially change a nation's position on certain issues, the UNSC is an opportunity to improve relations bilaterally and with the UN in general. Malaysia could copy Australia's formula of proactive engagement to promote not only its national interest but also to drive the agenda of the UNSC in general, while helping countries inconvenienced with international security problems all the while.

*On 12 February 2015, we were privileged to host **Mr Jon Merrill**, Assistant Secretary, Head of UN Security Council Taskforce, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australia, at our ISIS International Affairs Forum. Speaking from Australia's experience as an elected member of the UNSC (2013–2014), Merrill offered his take on some of the important issues and questions surrounding the viability of the UNSC, addressing contemporary challenges to as well as opportunities for the Council. His talk also covered what Malaysia could hope to gain from its UNSC non-permanent membership over the next two years. ISIS Analysts **Muhammad Sinatra** and **Puteri Nor Ariane Yasmin** report.*

Special Edition



http://www.isis.org.my/files/IF_2014/28_APR_2014_Special_Report_-_2014.edits.pdf