In the Hot Seat

What can Germany Achieve in the Security Council?

RICHARD GOWAN
May 2018

- Germany's upcoming term in the United Nations Security Council from 2019 to 2020 could be a rough ride, shaped by disputes over Iran and Syria, as well as other crises on which China, Russia, and the United States refuse to compromise.
- Germany should not run away from diplomatic controversies – or expend its energy on vague Council debates on general themes in international security – but take high-profile initiatives to refresh Council diplomacy over reconstruction in Syria, the war in Ukraine, and conflicts in Africa.
- As an influential power with established channels to China and Russia, Germany may be able to broker deals among the permanent members of the Council that they could not reach on their own.
- While Germany remains unlikely to secure a permanent seat on the Security Council, it will have to play a bigger role in European diplomacy after Brexit. Its term on the Council is an opportunity for Berlin to show that it is comfortable playing at the highest level of global crisis management.

1. Introduction
An Uncomfortable Seat at the UN?

Why would any country volunteer to serve on the Security Council these days? The Council is in bad shape: After seven years of arguments over Syria, Russia and the leading Western members of the Security Council have suffered an almost total breakdown of trust. Under President Trump, the United States (US) has become increasingly combative in United Nations (UN) debates on Iran and Israel. Although a relative moderate in the Trump administration, Nikki Haley – US ambassador to the UN – has warned that she is keeping track of countries that fail to support US positions. China, although still a relatively cautious player in Council affairs, is flexing its diplomatic muscles in New York, aiming to roll back the organization's work on human rights.

Any country that wins a two-year seat on the Security Council risks walking into a trap. Germany is currently on track to be elected on June 8, 2018 for one of the two non-permanent Council seats allocated to the Western European and Others Group (WEOG) for 2019 and 2020, alongside Belgium.[1] It will face considerable scrutiny. Given the volatile state of UN affairs, it is unlikely that Berlin will get through its term without high-profile disputes with Beijing, Moscow, and Washington. Complicating matters, the looming departure of the United Kingdom (UK) from the European Union (EU) in March 2019 raises questions about the EU's future leverage at the UN.[2] France will be the European standard-bearer in the Security Council, but there will be pressure on Germany to take a more prominent role in Council affairs not only in its own interest, but also on behalf of the EU as a whole.

German officials know the risks of such high-stakes diplomacy in New York. In March 2011, Berlin created a minor scandal by abstaining on Security Council Resolution 1973 authorizing military action in Libya.[3] This put it at odds with Britain and France – early advocates of an intervention – as well as the US, although many other EU members shared Berlin's skepticism. Domestic and foreign critics claimed that Chancellor Merkel and her advisers had shown that they were still not ready to play power politics. The abstention looks better in retrospect than it did at the time. NATO's Libyan adventure not only led to the country's collapse – which in turn contributed to the challenge of uncontrolled migration toward Europe – but it also poisoned major power relations at the UN. Yet if Germany's cautious approach in 2011 was justifiable, the Resolution 1973 episode shows how Security Council diplomacy can force Berlin to make uncomfortable decisions with potentially serious ramifications for its main strategic relationships.

Germany is already at the center of efforts to manage the fallout of President Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran deal, which will cast a long shadow over UN debates in the coming months and years. As one of the six powers – dubbed the European 3 (E3)+3 or Permanent 5 (P5)+1 – that signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Tehran in 2015, it faces the daunting prospect of trying to dispel US-Iranian tensions and regional frictions via the UN, inviting trouble with Washington.

Germany is probably better prepared for a crisis in the Council than it was in 2011. Learning from the lessons of Libya, the previous Grand Coalition (2013–2018) restructured and strengthened the foreign ministry's multilateral and crisis management sections. Berlin has also gained more practical knowledge of how the UN works in trouble spots, by deploying peacekeepers to Mali. The arrival of Chancellor Merkel's long-standing foreign policy adviser, Christoph Heusgen, as permanent representative to the UN in September 2017 underlined Berlin's increased focus on the organization. German diplomats are frank that they still do not have the depth of UN expertise that their British and French counterparts deploy. Other European states, such as the Nordic countries and the Netherlands, still give the UN greater weight in their foreign policies. Nevertheless, Germany is an increasingly credible diplomatic actor in New York.

While the upcoming Security Council term certainly brings risks, it is also an opportunity for Germany to consolidate its enhanced status on the international stage. The collapse of relations between the permanent members of the Security Council has created space for some of the elected members to play a greater role in

1. Israel, which was also in the race, put its bid on hold in early May.

2. See Richard Gowan, *Separation Anxiety: European Influence at the UN After Brexit* (European Council on Foreign Relations, May 2018); available at: http://www.ecfr.eu/page/-/ECFR-256_European_Influence_At_the_UN_After_Brexit.pdf.

3. Sarah Brockmeier, Germany and the Intervention in Libya, *Survival,* Vol. 55, No. 6 (2013).

deal-making. Australia and Luxembourg – which filled the WEOG seats from 2013 to 2014 – tabled a series of resolutions on humanitarian assistance to Syria that, while failing to break the overall deadlock over the war, still helped relief agencies get aid to suffering areas.[4] Sweden, which joined the Council in 2017, has been extremely active on the Syrian humanitarian file and in trying to reduce frictions between the permanent members more generally. This has often proved impossible, and the UK, France, and the US (the P3) grumble that the Swedes are sometimes too keen to compromise with China and Russia for the sake of consensus. Nevertheless, other elected members of the Council have mainly been supportive.

As an unusually weighty elected member of the Council, Germany could play this sort of big power brokering role at a higher level. German diplomats can bring their own diplomatic strengths to bear. These include channels for communication with Moscow and Beijing that, despite recent strains, could allow it to open new lines of discussion on issues like Syria and Ukraine, and thus circumvent the current paralysis in the Council. Rather than simply aim to get through its term with minimum fuss, Germany should aim to make a concrete difference to the Council's handling of some the most vexing items on the forum's agenda. Without some sort of progress on Syria and other major crises in the next few years, there is a good chance that the Council will continue to drift toward irrelevance and division. If Germany is taking a diplomatic risk simply by joining the Council at all, it may as well make an extra effort to restore some sense of order to the UN while it is there.

2. Priorities

How can Germany maximize its impact in the Security Council? Elected members need to maintain a very clear sense of their strategic goals while on the Council, because the sheer flow of events and paperwork can be overwhelming. Nonpermanent members regularly complain that it can take the best part of a year to get a grip on how the body works – even after solid training and planning – leaving them with very little time to achieve much of substance.

4. For details see Richard Gowan, *Australia in the UN Security Council* (The Lowy Institute, June 2014); available at: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/australia-un-security-council#.

This problem is compounded by the fact that all five permanent members of the Council are wary of letting elected members develop too much influence. P3 members typically negotiate the crucial parts of sensitive resolutions among themselves, before clearing them with the Chinese and Russians and finally bringing in the Elected 10 (E10). In a relatively recent innovation, P3 members have also asserted their right to »hold the pen« on drafting resolutions affecting specific countries and crises affecting their interests – France for Lebanon, the UK for Myanmar, and so on. This is another way to limit the E10's input, as the elected members are only »penholders« on a small number of country situations, although they do carry the load on more general resolutions and chair sanction committees.

Despite this, Germany can expect a more influential role in Council affairs than the average elected member. In 2011–2012, it was the penholder on Afghanistan and chaired a related sanctions committee dealing with Al-Qaeda. After the Libyan episode, the UK and France invited Peter Wittig, the German permanent representative, into discussions on Syria and Yemen. In the years since its last Council term, Germany has further cemented its privileged position vis-à-vis the P3, through its participation in the Iran talks. The Obama administration also tried to involve Germany in multilateral talks on Syria outside the Council in 2015.

Nonetheless, Berlin will need to select its priorities in the Council carefully – identifying areas where it not only wants to engage diplomatically, but also shape the UN agenda. It is likely to become penholder on Afghanistan once more – other elected WEOG members have handled this since Germany's last term – but this looms less large on the Council's agenda than it used to. Elected members also generally take up some thematic issues to promote during their terms, usually by organizing high-level, open debates when they hold the rotating presidency. In 2011–2012, Berlin made the security effects of climate change its main thematic priority. This was not unprecedented – the UK had held a debate on the issue a few years before – but it was still controversial with powers, including China and Russia, which argued that environmental issues lie outside the Council's remit. While the German debate had little substantive impact – the Council directed peacekeeping operations to keep an eye on environmental matters, eliciting some rather half-hearted mentions of rainfall levels in ensu-

ing UN reports – it did help consolidate climate-security links as a valid topic for Council discussions. The body now discusses environmental threats, such as desertification in the Sahel, with increasing regularity despite continuing Russian objections. It would be consistent for Germany to table climate change again in some form at least once in 2019 and 2020.

It is important, however, to recognize that the Council's nonpermanent members are generally judged on their impact (if any) on specific countries and crises, not on thematic debates. Many diplomats would like to see fewer thematic debates overall – which are generally anodyne, but involve a lot of diplomatic flummery as ministers descend on New York to pontificate – and permanent members are especially dismissive of these exercises. »The Council's thematic debates have made important contributions to normative developments, such as those regarding women and peace and security, children and armed conflict, and the protection of civilians«, notes Ian Martin, the former director of the think tank Security Council Report.[5] But they can also »become repetitive with little impact on country situations« and eat up time that might otherwise be spent on more concrete discussions of the crises and states on the Council's agenda. Germany has to focus on particular trouble spots to be credible.

In addition to Afghanistan, Germany is almost certain to find itself involved in complex diplomacy over Iran. Exactly what form this will take depends on whether the JCPOA unravels completely under US pressure in 2018. If there are still any prospects of sustaining some version of the nuclear bargain by the beginning of 2019, Berlin may have to act as a mediator with Tehran to keep diplomacy alive. If the deal collapses beyond salvation this year, Germany will find itself in a painful position alongside the UK and France in the Security Council, with both (i) trying to persuade the US to return to diplomacy and avoid escalatory steps in the Middle East, and (ii) aiming to dissuade Tehran from provocative actions that could worsen the situation further. To have any chance of success, Berlin will have to coordinate closely with France and the UK in the E3 format – an ad hoc framework that British officials have signaled they hope can survive Brexit – while also working more loosely with China and Russia to avoid counterproductive clashes over Iran in the Security Council. A persistent level of friction with the US is virtually inevitable.

Whatever approach Germany adopts to the Iranian issue, Berlin will have an interest in trying to keep other tracks of UN diplomacy alive. As far as possible, it should aim to maintain the »compartmentalization« of diplomatic issues: pushing for progress in those areas where it is possible, and preventing irresolvable disputes (in this case, Iran) from paralyzing the UN as a whole. There are two cases in which Berlin could invest that could create opportunities for some big power brokering: (i) employing practical steps to assist de-escalation in Syria; and (ii) deploying a UN operation to end the Ukrainian war. Germany may also want to find openings to work on African security issues, a rising priority for Berlin. It should, however, be wary of trying to play a leadership role on every issue that comes before the Council – from the Colombian peace process to the Korean situation – because this could distract it from its core priorities.

2.1 Easing the Pain in Syria?

As noted earlier, Australia and Luxembourg launched a Security Council initiative to support humanitarian assistance in Syria in 2013. This expanded to include resolutions authorizing relief agencies to deliver aid to rebel-held areas without consent from the Syrian government. While the Security Council has reauthorized this year on year, Russia has signaled that it thinks it is no longer relevant now that Damascus has recaptured much of its territory. Moscow wants to see Western countries stop talking about humanitarian issues – and other matters like chemical weapons – and offer reconstruction cash to Syria instead. The P3 and other donors, including Germany, have balked at these demands. A crisis over the JCPOA is likely to make compromises over Syria even harder to achieve. But if President Bashar al-Assad and his allies continue to grind down the opposition, it may ultimately be necessary to negotiate some sort of UN-backed framework for reconstruction and reconciliation that is acceptable to Russia and gives donors some control over how their aid is used, so that it does not simply degenerate into handouts for the regime. This will require tough compromises by all sides. Germany could be well-placed (or least-worst-placed) to

5. Ian Martin, In hindsight: What's wrong with the Security Council? *Security Council Report* (3.29.2018); available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2018-04/in_hindsight_whats_wrong_with_the_security_council.php.

lead Council negotiations on this unpleasant business, because it has not been entangled in the vicious P3-Russia arguments over Syria in recent years and because it is a heavy-weight aid donor.

2.2 Ukrainian Opportunity?

If UN talks on Syria are bound to be toxic, there is an outside chance that Germany could contribute to more positive discussions of Ukraine. Russian President Vladimir Putin surprised Western officials in September 2017 by hinting that he could be open to some sort of UN presence in the Donbass to end the war there. Then German foreign minister Sigmar Gabriel responded with excitement and, less predictably, the Trump administration jumped on the idea. There has been on-off US-Russian engagement on the issue since, and while many differences remain with regard to the size and mission of any UN force, a workable compromise may eventually arise. The recent German coalition agreement encourages this outcome. If an opportunity for a deal emerges in 2019 or 2020, Berlin will have a decisive role in finalizing it as a member of the Normandy Format for discussions of Ukraine. Germany could also act as a penholder on the issue in the Security Council, as both Russia and the US could object to the other dominating diplomacy on the topic. The UK has acted as penholder on Ukrainian issues to date, but London is quite marginal to diplomacy over the Donbass and has dire relations with Moscow after the Salisbury poisoning incident. France, another founder of the Normandy format, has a claim to lead on the issue – but Berlin could either share the pen with Paris or be a more acceptable broker to Moscow.

Leading serious diplomacy over either Syria or Ukraine, let alone both, would be a major test of German diplomatic capabilities. But progress on these issues – and especially parallel progress on both files – represents the best chance for a more general restoration of diplomatic cooperation with Russia in the Council.

2.3 An African Angle?

One question for Berlin is whether it should try to play a significant role in Council debates concerning any of the UN's peace operations in Africa, which take up over half of the Security Council's time and involve over 70,000 troops and police; Blue Helmet missions elsewhere involve fewer than 20,000 troops. While campaigning for a Council seat in 2011–2012, Germany promised to engage on African security issues, but it did not make them a priority after the Libyan episode. At that time, German officials and politicians were still skeptical that Africa mattered very much to them. Times have changed. The 2013 Mali crisis, the recognition that Sahel is a base for Al-Qaeda, and above all the large-scale migrant and refugee movements across the Sahara mean that Berlin has become far more conscious of African security issues. Germany should try to make some sort of concrete contribution to African affairs in the Security Council. The problem is identifying issues for which it is a more natural lead than either France in Francophone Africa or the three African members of the Council themselves.

Berlin's best approach could be to pitch itself as a joint penholder on specific African files with some of these other powers. For example, Germany and France have cooperated on a joint development approach in the Sahel with the UN and World Bank. Berlin and Paris could agree to hold the pen on related resolutions on security, development, and environmental threats to the Sahel in the Security Council. This would combine France's regional influence with Germany's financial clout. Berlin could also reach out to South Africa – another significant regional power outside the charmed circle of the P5. South Africa will join the Council in 2019 and is keen to make a positive impression there after a period of drift at the UN during the final days of Jacob Zuma's administration. Both countries could work together on reinforcing African peacekeeping and conflict prevention capacities through both EU and UN channels. This is a natural fit, because Germany is a well-established partner for the African Union.[6]

2.4 The Wider Security Council Agenda

Germany is unlikely to make much of a contribution to another potential area of positive diplomacy on the UN agenda: the inter-Korean peace process. Since 2017, China and the US have worked together surprisingly well on Korean sanctions through the Council, but this

6. For example, Germany paid for a new headquarters for the organization's Peace and Security Division in Addis Ababa.

is largely a bilateral process that even France and the UK have little handle on. Berlin will of course support further progress on the Koreas if it is possible, but there is no reason for it to expend excess diplomatic energy on this process.

There are other topics on the Council agenda on which Germany can exercise only limited leverage. Germany has made repeated calls to end the horrific war in Yemen, for example, but can do little in New York while the US and UK continue to back the Saudi-led initiative there. Other UN processes – such as monitoring the Colombian peace agreement – rattle along more or less successfully, and Germany can probably only improve them at the margins. This does not mean that German diplomats in New York should stand aside completely in such cases – the permanent members notice when their elected counterparts display a grasp of the details of Council business rather than churn out platitudes – but it is better to maintain a strong focus on a few clear priorities, rather than try to tinker with too many additional issues.

Berlin will, however, have to keep an eye on one set of issues on the Council agenda that rarely get much attention these days: Balkan affairs. The Council still holds routine meetings on Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, to little effect. Yet with tensions mounting in Bosnia in particular, there is a risk that a new crisis could suddenly force Southeast Europe back up the UN agenda, possibly creating further rifts with Russia. Germany would once again need to line up with the UK and France to secure European interests.

3. Conclusion

This paper has deliberately set out an ambitious agenda for Germany at the Security Council. Even if it pursued all these lines of action with some success, the Security Council is likely to remain exceptionally tense. A term on the Council is not simply a privilege for influential countries like Germany, or a platform to raise a few issues of national concern; it is a brief opening that a well-prepared and determined country can use to try to restore some balance to disorderly great power politics. German officials and politicians must be realistic about the significant risks and uncertain chances of success involved in UN diplomacy.

Nonetheless, the Council seat is an opportunity as well as a burden. This is an opportunity for Germany to show that it is able and willing to take on high-stakes, multilateral security diplomacy. Brexit is stripping the EU of one of its two most experienced players at the UN. There will be calls on Germany to play a more prominent role in speaking for Europe in New York alongside France – not only during its Council tenure, but also beyond. If Germany can show that it has mastered the UN game in 2019–2020, it can stake a claim to an ongoing influence on Council talks – especially on topics like Ukraine – once it leaves.

There is currently little chance of Germany securing its long-standing goal of a permanent seat on the Council, which is bogged down in endless UN General Assembly negotiations. At least three of the existing permanent members – China, Russia, and the US – are deeply skeptical of reform. The most credible way for Germany to develop real influence over the UN is not to pursue this formalistic chimera, but to weigh in on the real crises and conflicts dominating the Council agenda. The Security Council is in bad shape and Germany cannot save it on its own. In spite of that, it can act as a broker between the big powers and as an advocate for stability at a time when the UN and the wider world are very unstable indeed.

About the author

Richard Gowan is a fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations and teaches at Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs. He was previously research director at New York University's Center on International Cooperation, to which he is still attached as a non-resident fellow, and writes a weekly column on multilateral issues for (»Diplomatic Fallout«) for *World Politics Review*.

Imprint

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Global Policy and Development
Hiroshimastr. 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | New York Office
747 Third Avenue, Suite 34D | New York, NY 10017 | USA

Responsible:
Bettina Luise Rürup | Executive Director | FES New York

Phone: +1-212-687-0208
www.fesny.org

To order publications:
fes.associate@fesny.org

Commercial use of all media published by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) is not permitted without the written consent of the FES.

The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung office in New York serves as a liaison between the United Nations, FES field offices and partners in developing countries to strenghten the voice of the Global South. It contributes to UN debates on economic and social development, and on peace and security issues. Towards this end, FES New York annually organizes some 30 seminars, conferences and roundtables and regularly publishes briefing papers and fact sheets. In addition, it contributes to a dialogue on the work of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund in Washington, DC. The New York office is located in close proximity to the United Nations headquarters. The office has four permanent staff members and provides internships for students specializing in international affairs, development and economic policy.

The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily those of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

This publication is printed on paper from sustainable forestry.

EFQM
Committed to excellence

ISBN
978-3-96250-114-3