

Foiled in the Security Council: The United States, Extending Arms Embargoes and Iran

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Global Research, August 17, 2020

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [United Nations](#), [US NATO War](#)
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There are no official policing authorities as such when it comes to international relations. Realists imagine a jungle of states, the preyed upon and the predators, a grim state of affairs moderated by alliances, agreements and understandings. But there is one body whose resolutions are recognised as having binding force: the Security Council, that most powerful of creatures in that jumble known as the United Nations.

To convince the permanent five on the Security Council to reach agreement is no easy feat. There are the occasional humiliations in the failure to get resolutions passed, but whether it be the US, Russia, China, France or the UK, wise heads tend to prevail. Best put forth resolutions with at least some chance of garnering support. Rejection will be hard to take.

On August 14, a degree of humiliation was heaped upon the US delegation. Washington seemed to have read the situation through fogged goggles, assuming that it would get the nine votes needed to extend arms restrictions on Iran due to expire in October under Resolution 2231. Of the 15 members, only two – the United States and Dominican Republic – felt the need to vote for it. Russia and China strongly opposed it; the rest were abstentions. Previous [warnings](#) that any such quixotic effort was bound to fail had been ignored.

The body most shown up in all of this was the US State Department and, it followed, its indignant chief Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

“The UN Security Council failed today to hold Iran accountable,” [he raged on Twitter](#). “It enabled the world’s top state sponsor of terrorism to buy and sell deadly weapons and ignored the demands of countries in the Middle East. America will continue to work to correct this mistake.”

He also [called the position](#) taken by Britain and France “unfortunate”, as it had only been the US view to “keep the same rules that have been in place since 2007.”

US ambassador to the UN, Kelly Craft, [took it personally](#), giving the impression that she saw it coming in the diplomatic tangle.

“The United States is sickened but not surprised by the outcome of today’s UNSC vote. The Council’s failure to extend the Iran’s arm embargo is a devastating blow to the Council’s credibility.”

She also [promised](#) that the US would “not abandon the region to Iranian terror and intimidation, and when we look for partners in that effort, we will look beyond the UN Security Council.”

The humiliation gave Iran’s Foreign Ministry spokesman Abbas Mousavi much room to gloat.

“In the 75 years of United Nations history, America has never been so isolated,” he [confidently asserted](#). “Despite all the trips, pressure, and the hawking, the United States could only mobilize a small country [to vote] with them.”

There was much that sat oddly in this enterprise. It showed a US effort strongly driven by the anti-Iranian Middle East coven of Arab Gulf states, along with Israel. That said, the position amongst those states is not uniform either. In the [words of](#) Mutlaq bin Majid Al-Qahtani, special envoy of the Qatari Minister of Foreign Affairs for Combating Terrorism and Mediation in Settlement of Disputes,

“Iran is a neighbouring country with which we have good neighbourly relations, and it has a position that we value in the State of Qatar, the government and the people, especially during the unjust blockade on Qatar.”

Absurdly, Pompeo has promised to see how the US might rely on a provision in the nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action it unilaterally left in 2018, which permits a “snapback”. Triggering it would entail a return to the full complement of UN sanctions against Iran. This novel take was also [given an airing](#) by Craft. “Under Resolution 2231, the United States has every right to initiate snapback of provisions of previous Security Council resolutions.”

In April, Reuters [noted](#) the view of a European diplomat that it was “very difficult to present yourself as a compliance watcher of a resolution you decided to pull out of. Either you’re in or either you’re out.” Samuel M. Hickey from the Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation also [warned](#) in May that invoking the snapback provision, especially by a non-party, “would not only underscore US isolation on the global stage, it might also undermine the effectiveness of the UNSC by creating a dispute over the validity of a UNSC resolution.” Russia and China expressed similar readings: it was a bit rich to trigger provisions in an agreement so publicly repudiated.

Iran, in turn, huffed at the very idea of a snapback [through](#) its UN ambassador Majid Takht-Ravanchi.

“Imposition of any sanctions or restrictions on Iran by the Security Council will be met severely by Iran and our options are not limited.”

This entire act of gross miscalculation did its fair share of harm, though not in the sense understood by Pompeo and his officials. It spoke to a clumsy unilateralism masquerading as credible support; to great power obstinacy misguided in attaining a goal. It was not the UN Security Council that had failed, but the US that had failed it, an effort that many at the UN [are reading](#) as directed at torching the remnants of the Iran nuclear deal. The [assessment](#)

of the US effort by former UN weapons inspector Scott Ritter was sharp and relevant.

“You got the Dominican Republic on board (how much did that cost the US taxpayer?) Not a single other nation voted with you! The shining city on the hill has been reduced to a glow, like the embers of a dying fire.”

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