

For the past two years, Germany has been a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council. For International Reports, Andrea Ellen Ostheimer, Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's New York office, talks to diplomat Christoph Heusgen about the challenges and achievements of this period, the role of China and Russia, and Germany's foreign policy compass.

IR: Ambassador Heusgen, you have been Germany's Permanent Representative to the United Nations since summer 2017. Prior to that, you worked for twelve years as Chancellor Merkel's Foreign and Security Policy Adviser. Every eight years, Germany campaigns for one of the ten non-permanent seats on the United Nations Security Council, which are elected for two-year terms by the UN General Assembly. In 2019, Germany began its sixth term with an ambitious agenda and cooperated with other members as co-penholder on key regional issues, including Afghanistan, humanitarian aid for Syria, and Sudan. It chaired the Sanctions Committees on Libya and North Korea, too. Germany also set out to advance other key priorities in the Security Council, such as the Women, Peace and Security agenda and the climate-security nexus. Looking back over these two years, where would you say you have made a real impact?

Christoph Heusgen: Firstly, in these two years we did what we said we would do. We worked

steadily to advocate the rule of law and a rules-based international order. This may sound obvious for a global organisation whose foremost task is to safeguard international peace and security. But – unfortunately – that is not the case. Over recent years, we have witnessed how the United Nations' founding concept – the peaceful resolution of crises and conflicts and promoting human rights around the world in the spirit of its Charter – has increasingly come under attack. When China commits massive human rights abuses against the Uyghurs, when Russia unscrupulously violates humanitarian law with its bombing of hospitals in Syria, and when even the former US administration left a void by withdrawing from key multilateral organisations, something must be done. Overall, I believe Germany sent out a clear signal as a strong advocate of multilateralism and supporter of the aims and values of the UN Charter.

I would like to just mention a couple of specific initiatives from Germany's Security Council presidencies that will be a legacy of our work. Sexual violence is all too often used as a terrible weapon of war. For us, it was a key priority to ensure the international community no longer stands by and watches. We found support in Nobel Peace Prize Laureates Nadia Murad and Denis Mukwege and in human rights lawyer Amal Clooney, who gave the Security Council an impressive account of the consequences of the serious human rights abuses that occur all too often in many war zones. In April 2019, the Security Council adopted a Resolution that, for the first time, focuses on the survivors of these crimes and paves the way for holding the perpetrators to account.

During our second presidency in July 2020, the provision of cross-border humanitarian aid to the people of Syria teetered on a knife-edge. We feared that Russia and China would cut off all humanitarian aid to the people who needed it so desperately. The extent to which these countries were purely motivated by political expediency was sobering, shocking even. We focused on the suffering civilians, consulted with the UN relief agencies, and, after tough negotiations, worked with our co-penholder Belgium to secure at least one access point for a longer period. This was not the result we were hoping for, but at least it provided many people with some vital relief from their hardship.

It also showed us that it's worth fighting for every single person threatened by crisis and conflict. This was and remains our motivation and driving force.

IR: Your work at the Security Council took place against the backdrop of some serious, at times unprecedented, geopolitical challenges. But despite all the obstacles you faced in recent years, there have also been some positive developments. What needs to be done to ensure these positive achievements continue after your term on the Security Council?

Christoph Heusgen: You're right, there have been many promising developments. For example,

Germany and the UK co-sponsored a new political mission in the Security Council that will support the fragile process of political transition in Sudan. In Afghanistan, we joined forces with our Indonesian partners to ensure that the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan continues to assist this country.

Our unwavering dedication to a particularly polarised conflict on the doorstep of Europe has helped lay the groundwork for a potential political solution. As chair of the Sanctions Committee to oversee the Libya arms embargo, we have consistently urged all sides to honour their commitments. The Berlin Conference on Libya in support of the UN's peace efforts brought the two warring parties to the table for the first time in January 2020. We initiated a resolution, and, by giving its support, the Security Council lent additional weight to the outcome of the Berlin Conference. The ceasefire that is now in force and Libya's domestic political process with the prospect of elections in late 2021 give people hope for a better future.

IR: The UN Security Council consists of 15 members: the five permanent members (P5) China, France, the United Kingdom, Russia, and the United States, plus ten members elected based on regional proportional representation. How much influence do elected members wield? What instruments do they have at their disposal? And, in your daily work, how do you deal with the Sword of Damocles represented by the veto power of permanent members?

Christoph Heusgen: Of course, the five permanent members have a special, indeed privileged, role,

which goes hand in hand with great responsibility. Their veto power is part of this, of course. I believe using it for purely political motives – we already mentioned the actions

of Russia and China regarding humanitarian aid in Syria – is extremely problematic and irresponsible. Russia and China’s veto against providing the best possible humanitarian aid to the people of Syria is certainly a tragic climax, casting a shadow over this special privilege.

But – fortunately – we do not have to live with this Sword of Damocles hanging over the day-to-day work of the Security Council. That’s because every Security Council member, including the P5, must persuade others and build majorities in order for resolutions to be adopted or to bring external briefers into the Security Council. In the end, nine affirmative votes are required.

While on the Security Council, we were always guided by the values underpinning our beliefs and goals, and we tried to persuade others to join us based on these values. So, over the past two years, I think we clearly demonstrated that elected members can also have specific aspirations and a willingness to shape affairs. Most substantive proposals, whether relating to the climate-security nexus or the mediation of protracted conflicts such as in Libya, came from elected members.

What’s more, all Security Council Sanctions Committees are chaired by non-permanent members. This can be painstaking work, but for us, it went hand-in-hand with shaping specific policies. For instance, we facilitated the work of NGOs on behalf of the people of North Korea. This may sound very technical, but in practice it means that aid organisations can now reliably plan the delivery of life-saving food and medicines. This provides a sorely needed glimmer of hope for those people living under a brutal regime that places more importance on increasing its weapons arsenal than the welfare of its citizens.

IR: The past two years have once again seen a strong European presence on the Security Council. In addition to Europe’s two permanent members France and the United Kingdom, Estonia, Poland, Belgium, and Germany had an opportunity to represent European values and positions in the UN Security Council. How much “European unity” was actually palpable in the Security Council? And which issues are made more complex or difficult because of the different interests of European Council members, despite their common values?

Christoph Heusgen: The consensus among EU members in the Security Council on all key issues

has provided a solid foundation that we steadily built upon over the last two years. Of course, the positions of individual EU members are nuanced or have different focuses. But when it was crunch time, we all stuck together. EU members forged ahead together on every single Security Council vote. We often mentioned this in joint press statements before or after Security Council meetings.

In the wake of Brexit, the UK has continued to closely align itself with EU positions in the Security Council. Particularly regarding the difficult and ongoing struggle to preserve the Iran nuclear deal, the E3 – Germany, France, and the UK – have invariably formed a vital alliance in the Security Council and beyond. This alliance has held firm and proved its worth.



Reliant on humanitarian aid: In the Security Council, Germany has advocated support for people in need in Syria.
Source: © Khalil Ashawi, Reuters.

What could be further improved: As EU member states, there are times when we should not only be singing the same tune in the Security Council, but in fact speaking with one “EU ambassadorial voice”. In other words, one EU member should speak for the whole group, as the African non-permanent members of the Security Council do, for example. We will keep working on this for our next term.

IR: In March/April 2019, Germany and France coordinated a joint presidency of the Security Council, another powerful symbol of Europe’s voice on the Council. Among other things, the two countries launched the Alliance for Multilateralism. Why was this deemed necessary at precisely this time? And what is the added value of such an alliance?

Christoph Heusgen: This brings me back to your first question. The international system, from the

World Health Organization, and the International Criminal Court, to the Paris Climate Agreement, and the World Trade Organization, is under serious pressure, and massive human rights violations are left unchecked. We need global bodies like the United Nations to have the power to act. We believe everyone should abide by the rules that they have agreed to. This is what we are fighting for. That is our foreign policy compass.



And this lies at the heart of the Alliance for Multilateralism, launched by Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas together with his French counterpart and many other governments around the world. Particularly at a time when there is a need for more international cooperation, but when cohesion has come under severe pressure in the United Nations, too, the Alliance for Multilateralism holds great appeal for countries the world over. The success of the Alliance bears testimony to the strong global support for an international order based on rules and respect for international law. Germany must work consistently to achieve this, and this is our aspiration.

IR: Together with Brazil, India, and Japan (G4), Germany has for many years been trying to gain support for Security Council reforms, including enlargement. Where are we in this process? And what are the chances of progress in this area, given the political realities?

Christoph Heusgen: The Security Council is in urgent need of reform because its present composition no longer reflects the real world – for example, not one African country holds a permanent seat. Other stakeholders also lack adequate



In urgent need of reform: The composition of the Security Council “no longer reflects the realities of the world”, says Christoph Heusgen. [Source: © Carlo Allegri, Reuters.](#)

representation. With that said, the Security Council is gambling with its most precious currency: legitimacy. The vast majority of United Nations members share this view and are in favour of reform. Together with the G4 interest group, we are working to ensure that meaningful talks can finally begin. This is the core business of diplomacy: devising solutions, exploring options, forging compromises. However, a few fierce opponents of reform, led by China, continue to block this issue. Unfortunately, this has also been the case over the last two years. The fact that the COVID-19 pandemic has largely made diplomacy a virtual reality, has not been conducive to making substantial progress either. But we are working on it.

IR: In late March 2020, shortly after the World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 pandemic a global emergency, UN Secretary-General António Guterres called for a global ceasefire. However, unlike in previous situations (such as the Ebola outbreak in West Africa in 2014/2015), the Security Council remained silent for months. Could the Security Council have done more to support the United Nations system in

relation to the COVID-19 pandemic? And in hindsight, is there anything that could have been done better to negotiate a Security Council resolution in support of the global ceasefire?

Christoph Heusgen: In answer to your first question: absolutely! It was a real failure on the part of

the Security Council when it did not immediately and publicly support the Secretary-General's call for a global ceasefire in spring 2020. In the Security Council, I myself once described this as a "deafening silence". The Security Council members were basically unanimous that the COVID-19 pandemic made people in crisis and conflict zones even more vulnerable and that the guns should be silenced. Unfortunately, a major disagreement between the US and China over the role of the World Health Organization led to weeks of deadlock in negotiations on the Security Council resolution that should have strengthened the Secretary-General's position.

It ultimately took far too long, but perhaps in the end it was something of a fortunate coincidence that Germany's Security Council Presidency began in July 2020 with the unanimous adoption of the French-Tunisian resolution.¹ It was also symbolic that Germany joined forces with Estonia to help build bridges and ensure the resolution was passed – which takes us back to the question of the influence wielded by elected members.

IR: Germany has made a major contribution to peace and security over the past two years. Now that the term has ended, which areas might Germany continue to engage with through other instruments?

Christoph Heusgen: It's true that leaving the Security Council means we no longer have the same

direct opportunity to participate in and shape the UN's most important body. Yet, we endeavour to continue our active contribution towards preserving peace and security. The Berlin Process, which supports the United Nations with regard to Libya, still very much bears Germany's signature. The arrival of the new US administration holds much promise for the Security Council taking a systematic, consistent approach in order to tackle the impact of climate change. In summer 2020, Germany worked with a group of ten Security Council members to draw up a strong joint draft resolution in this respect. This is something that our successors in the Security Council can specifically build upon. The Alliance for Multilateralism will also continue to devise potential solutions to urgent global issues.

IR: Germany will run for the Security Council again in eight years' time. What issues do you think will be on the table then?

Christoph Heusgen: We will still be discussing the world's pressing crises and conflicts. Too many of

them remain unresolved. I'm thinking of the suffering of the people of Yemen or the situation in Syria, which is still a long way from reaching a political resolution.

And we'll certainly still be talking about how climate change impacts security. When climate change robs people of their livelihoods, drives them from their homeland and

forces them to compete with local communities elsewhere in order to survive, this is a question of security. We are also directly impacted by whether people can lead a dignified and secure life in their own countries or whether they are drawn to Europe or elsewhere. This should also be on the Security Council's agenda in eight years' time.

The same goes for human rights. We fear that serious violations to fundamental human rights will also occur in future. We will continue to stand up for the victims and voice our criticism of those who breach international law.

IR: Mr Ambassador, would you allow us to finish with a rather personal question? You are one of Germany's most experienced diplomats. What special skills does one need to be a Permanent Representative to the United Nations in New York? What recommendations can you give to your Irish and Norwegian colleagues who began their two-year terms on the Security Council in January 2021?

Christoph Heusgen: The most important qualities of a diplomat are the ability to listen and never

let the dialogue break down. Have clear positions and advocate for them in a clear manner. And above all, always remain curious and open-minded. I think these are all also important qualities for a UN ambassador.

With Ireland and Norway, two very experienced ambassadors have joined the Security Council. If I were to give them one piece of advice, then perhaps it would be something I said in one of my last sessions: "Even if you suffer personal attacks, never give up. The non-permanent members of the Security Council are elected to defend international law and the United Nations."

Questions were posed by Andrea Ellen Ostheimer. She is Head of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung's office in New York.

-translated from German-

- 1 Early in May 2020, permanent member France and elected member Tunisia put forward a draft resolution to address the COVID-19 pandemic in the Security Council. This called for an immediate global ceasefire to deal with the effects of the pandemic. However, the draft was locked in a stalemate for two months because of a dispute between China and the US over the role of the WHO. During the negotiations, the elected members Germany and Estonia played a substantial role in overcoming the blockade.