

CIGI Interview on the US Chairmanship of the UN Security Council in July, 2013.

This month, the United States holds the presidency of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC). It's reported that in addition to monitoring events in Syria and Mali, as well as conducting several briefings and mandate adoptions, the Council will focus on the situation in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and the Great Lakes, and hold open debates on the Middle East and the protection of journalists. To learn more about what to expect from this month at the UNSC, we speak to Canada's former ambassador to the UN and CIGI Distinguished Fellow Paul Heinbecker.

CIGI: How involved is the rotating president in setting the month's agenda at the Security Council?

Paul Heinbecker: Each month the president sets the agenda in consultation with the other members of the Council. It's up to the president to propose what the agenda will be. In response, perhaps some members will suggest other things. They may agree or disagree with some items. To take a hypothetical example, if the incoming Security Council president proposed Syria as an item, it's conceivable that the Russians would object because doing so might complicate the proposed high level meeting to be held later this summer in Geneva. In any case, the incoming president plays a very central role: he or she proposes, others respond and then the president takes the responses and through a process of negotiations produces some kind of an agreed agenda.

In this particular case, Ambassador Susan Rice is no longer in New York. She has succeeded Tom Donilon as National Security Adviser. As he has already left his office, Ms. Rice is now in the chair at the National Security Council. Samantha Power, who is Rice's proposed successor in New York, needs to be confirmed by the US Senate before she can take up the job. Since she isn't going to be at the Council in July either, the number two ambassador at the UN (the US had five ambassadors there in my time; we had two; the Dominican Republic had seven, but that's a different story) will chair the Council for the month.

It's part of the everyday reality of the UN that much of the Council's focus is on African issues, because that's where peace and security are most often at risk. In this particular month the Council will have five or six items on Africa, and will be making a big push on the Congo (DRC) to see whether they can finally get some traction on resolving an issue that has cost so many lives, from warfare, disease and hunger. Secretary of State John Kerry will chair this important debate; from time to time, the foreign minister of the country that holds the chair presides over meetings and sometimes they invite their foreign minister counterparts to join them in the Council. Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy chaired some Council sessions the last time Canada was on the Council, during the period in office of the Chrétien government.

CIGI: Is, can or has the rotating presidency been used as an opportunity for politics on the global stage?

Heinbecker: Yes, it can. Canada did that very successfully the last time we were on the Council. In fact, we set a kind of template for non-permanent members of the Council to use. We campaigned for the Council seat with an agenda and had a plan when we arrived in office in New York to implement that agenda. As a serendipitous consequence of the alphabetic basis of the rotating presidency, Canada had two opportunities to chair the Council in our two year term—February 1999 and April 2000. As

there were 24 months in a term and as there were only 15 members, we got to chair twice. On the first occasion we used the Council chairmanship to launch our own agenda and on the second we followed up.

When we set the agenda of the Council, we put our Human Security agenda on it: the protection of civilians in armed conflict, the creation of the International Criminal Court, a report on Rwanda to force the five permanent members to take responsibility for their inaction on the Rwanda genocide, blood diamonds, the need for greater accountability and transparency, and more. As previously mentioned, we set that agenda in consultation with the other members, who largely accepted our suggestions. So it actually can make a big difference when the chair of the Council is ambitious and effective. In the Canadian case, as president of the Council, we significantly advanced Canadian foreign policy goals and political interests internationally.

CIGI: Is it fair to expect more this month at the Security Council given who holds the presidency?

Heinbecker: Whereas the elected members only get their chance to serve on the Council periodically — about every 8 or 10 years in Canada's case until we lost in 2010 -- and the permanent members can count on a near annual opportunity, some of the more capable non-permanent members tended to be more ambitious. For the permanent members, there is, or at least was in my time, a tendency to see chairing as "business as usual" and to try less hard to make the most of the opportunity. It's noteworthy that Secretary Kerry will himself chair the Council, indicating that the United States is stressing their Africa agenda.

CIGI: As you mentioned above, it's anticipated that later this year Samantha Power will succeed Susan Rice at the UN. Given her deep knowledge in, and views on, human security and her experience in President Obama's administration (for

example, the Atrocities Prevention Board), how will Power influence American foreign policy at the UN?

Susan Rice, who had been Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs during President Bill Clinton's administration, has an abiding interest in Africa that she manifested in her handling of the Council during her time at the UN. It's worth noting that Rice was a member of the US cabinet and thus enjoyed greater influence in Washington than some of her predecessors had— it has been the case often, though not always, that the US ambassador to the UN is a member of the US cabinet and of the National Security Council in Washington.

I don't know whether Power will be a member of cabinet — if not, she will have less opportunity to bring her issues to the attention of the president. Her strong interest in human security and R2P will certainly be part of her personal impulse, but US policy will be made in Washington, largely in the National Security Council by senior people with the CIA, State Department and Department of Defense, among others. She will have input into US policy.

Power has already been in a strong position to affect US foreign policy, given her role in President Obama's White House working alongside the State Department and National Security Council. She will not necessarily be in a stronger position to affect foreign policy when she goes to New York, but she will move into a higher profile, front line position where she will be expressing American policy and carrying the brief of the US to the UN, To some extent the reverse will also be true: she will be representing the UN to Washington.

CIGI: Does her appointment imply a stronger American commitment to multilateralism and the UN system?

In my judgement, the US commitment to multilateralism is pretty strong. It has been much stronger than, for example, Canada's has been in recent years — although we tend to think of

ourselves otherwise. In my memory, the US president has never missed a general debate in the UN that takes place every September. The US president has also come to Security Council meetings on special issues — not often, but occasionally.

At the same time, the place of the UN in US policy has varied. Many US administrations, especially the George W. Bush administration, have tended to see the UN less as a seat of global governance and more as one instrument of foreign policy among others, to be used when it was likely to be more availing than the other instruments. Multilateralism if necessary but not necessarily multilateralism. In other words, if there were a prospect of a better outcome at the UN, the US would deal with an issue there. If the US thought prospects of success were better if it worked bilaterally or unilaterally, it would proceed that way. Having such options is the prerogative of a superpower. I personally think that the US should be even more committed to multilateralism and the UN as a first resort— that it would be in their interest to do so and Canada's interest, especially in the context of the rise of China. The day is coming when the Chinese may decide that if the Americans don't need to follow the rules and strictures of a cooperative multilateral system, they don't have to do so either, and that could put us all into difficulty.