Mеждународные отношения

Iнternational relations

UNITED NATIONS SECURITY COUNCIL AND COVID-19

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The article provides an overview of the United Nations Security Council activities in confronting infectious diseases, analysing the reasons for its inaction vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic. The following topics are addressed: geopolitical circumstances of the COVID-19 outbreak, the UN Security Council experiences in countering the infectious diseases' challenges, particularities, and special features of the UN Security Council position vis-à-vis the coronavirus pandemic.

Keywords: United Nations Security Council; COVID-19 pandemic; European Union; USA; China; Ebola outbreak; Security Council resolutions; Euro-Atlantic region; Eurasian space; political confrontation; consensus; infectious disease; global challenge; global threat; national economy; world economy; United Nations Secretary-General; duties and jurisdiction of the UN Security Council.

СОВЕТ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ ООН И COVID-19

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Рассматривается деятельность Совета Безопасности Организации Объединенных Наций по противодействию инфекционным заболеваниям как глобальному вызову, анализируются причины бездеятельности Совета Безопасности в период пандемии COVID-19. В центре внимания автора следующие вопросы: геополитические условия в момент вспышки COVID-19, практики Совета Безопасности в противостоянии вызовам, связанным с инфекционными заболеваниями, особенности и специфика позиции Совета Безопасности в отношении пандемии коронавируса.

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Introduction

The United Nations Security Council (SC) met the COVID-19 pandemic in a rather bad shape. By the beginning of the 21st century, the traditional "cold war" confrontation returned to the SC, and it was not able to effectively manage the crises in Syria, Ukraine, and the acute world crisis associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. The SC has not succeeded in reforming itself despite 30 years of promises by the UN ambassadors of different countries to make it more effective and more representative. At the end of the 20th century, some big UN member-states (Japan, Germany, India, Brasil, Nigeria, and South Africa) expressed their wish to become the SC permanent members and received support from one or two of the current five permanent members. Nevertheless, the consensus between the big five was not reached on who deserves the permanent seat. And the SC composition remains as in 1945.

It is necessary to understand from the beginning that the assessments and conclusions contained in this article do not apply to the entire United Nations Organisation (or to the UN system), they are made in relation to the activity of the SC during the coronavirus pandemic. The hypothesis that the author is trying to prove is as follows: the SC's inaction vis-à-vis the pandemic was in large extent determined by the political confrontation within the SC (mainly between the USA and the People's Republic of China (PRC)) and had negatively affected the image of the whole organisation and its ability to confront other global challenges.

One of the main consequences of COVID-19 is the securitisation of medicine. This means that medical doctors and scientists acquired a much stronger voice in formulating the security policies for civil societies in different countries. In our days to maintain international peace and security means to secure the lives of the ordinary citizens in China, Russia, the USA, Brasil, the EU, in all UN member-states, including of course Belarus.

Because the coronavirus has become an international problem quite recently (in March 2020) there are no fundamental studies of strategies to confront it internationally and in different countries, as yet. Nevertheless, there are few articles on UN involvement in dealing with the international consequences of the infectious diseases' outbreaks. The latter is represented, for example, by J. Cohen's article on the SC's response to the Ebola outbreak. He writes about the logic of confronting Ebola that prevailed in 2014 and included lifting travel and border restrictions introduced against the affected countries, there was even mentioning of the establishment of the UN Mission for Ebola Emergency Response (UNMEER) with the priorities of stopping the outbreak, treating the infected, ensuring essential social services, preserving stability and preventing further outbreaks [1]. In Journal of Global Security Studies published in Oxford (UK) there was an article by Ch. Enemark on the SC's role in disease control. He came to a conclusion based mainly on the content of the SC's resolution 2177 on Ebola that "the Council contribution to health governance was to support a shift in security logic: from securitisation to securing circulation" [2, p. 148]. There, perhaps, was such logic in the SC's thinking in 2014 but in 2020 the health governance was conducted mainly at the states' level and was underpinned by a logic of total securitisation. And not just some researchers but SC's official reports did not envisage a new global health challenge in a short run. In January 2020 a SC research report on prioritisation and sequencing of council mandates was prepared and there was no mentioning of any global health threat or challenge among the SC's priorities[1]. In the article "COVID-19 as a threat to international peace and security: what place for the UN Security Council?" M. Svicevic underlined that the SC for the first time determined a public health issue as a threat to international peace and security when it adopted resolution 2177 on Ebola. In his opinion, "potential resistance from China" prevented the SC from making such a determination in the case of COVID-19 [3]. In the article "The United Nations Security Council and securitisation of COVID-19" by T. Muherjee posted on the site of Observer Research Foundation (an Indian think-tank), the regret was expressed at the lacking of global governance at a time of the pandemic because "the United States is failing in its response under president Trump, whereas nations constituting the European Union operate as separate entities. Totalitarian states such as China and Russia, are occupied with sustaining their respective state apparatus, rather than focusing efforts on a global response" [4]. In the article "A legal analysis of the United Nations response to Covid-19: how the Security Council can still help" S. Mathur declared that the pandemic comes under the duties and jurisdiction of the SC as the communicable disease as it could pose a threat to international peace and security because it undermines the stability of na-

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[1]Prioritasation and sequencing of council mandates: walking the walk? [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.securitycouncil-report.org/atf/cf%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/prioritisation_sequencing_mandates_report.pdf (date of access: 13.05.2020).

tions if remains unchecked; it would have a devastating impact on the economy of states and by extension, on the world economy [5]. Giving the EU perspective on the SC inaction vis-à-vis the coronavirus pandemic, S. Fillion sides with French UN ambassador N. de Riviere who said while assuming his duties as a chairman of the SC for the month of June 2020: "It's very painful. It's very frustrating. And again, on this one, the Security Council is not fulfilling its mandate" [6].

The common denominator of the recent publications on the UN response to COVID-19 is that the SC had jurisdiction and experience in confronting the global threat of the infectious diseases but failed to fulfill its mandate because of political infighting.

Geopolitical circumstances of the COVID-19 outbreak

The United Nations was created by the victors of the World War II with the aim to prevent an occurrence of another world war by providing an international collective security mechanism. Unfortunately, its main body which is SC had become divided between two opposing blocks during the Cold War period. This confrontation was suspended for ten years in the 1990s. During that period the SC managed to take consensual decisions that stopped the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and created a framework for removing the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, the regime that turned the country into a training field for the international terrorists.

The era of confrontation came back into the SC after the famous U-turn over the Atlantic performed by the personal airplane of Russian prime minister E. Primakov on 24 March 1999. E. Primakov was on his way to Washington to negotiate with International Monetary Fund a new loan for Russia when US vice-president A. Gore called and informed him that the NATO air force was about to strike Yugoslavia. Russian prime minister considered this NATO decision an unacceptable stretch of the SC resolutions adopted by that time on Yugoslavia and ordered the pilot to return to Moscow.

After 1999 the SC again became divided. The disaccord among its permanent members prevented it from taking decisions on most acute crisis situations threatening international peace and security in the 21st century, be it in Syria, be it in Ukraine, be it in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The SC was able to perform the peace support operations (PSOs) only in those countries where its permanent members' interests were not seriously involved.

The United Nations is a global inter-governmental organisation. Therefore, the global challenges to the system of international relations have become the main dilemmas for the organisation. If it does not adequately react to these challenges, they turn into the threats to international peace and security. Among them, one could mention climate change, international terrorism, migration crisis, local conflicts with the participation of the bigger powers, ecological problem. The COVID-19 pandemic could be considered a part of the last problem, but it is far more complex if one takes into account its consequences for world politics and the economy.

The UN could be compared to a mirror that reflects the main problems and contradictions of the contemporary world. The financial and economic crisis of 2008–2009 contributed greatly to the strengthening of unilateralism and isolationism in international affairs. The current confrontations between the Russian Federation and the West, between the USA and China is undoubtedly very negatively reflected in the organisation's capabilities to deal with global threats and challenges. The coronavirus pandemic also played in the hands of unilateralism and isolationism.

The SC experiences in countering the infectious diseases' challenges

There were precedents in the recent UN history of the SC participation in streamlining the international efforts to fight infectious diseases.

In 2000 the SC adopted resolution 1308 that stated that "the HIV/AIDS pandemic, if unchecked, may pose a risk to stability and security" in the world. The SC debated a necessity to include AIDS prevention in the UN mandates for PSOs in Africa [4]. In 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) arose in the PRC, affected Hong Kong. The SC formally did not adopt a resolution on the SARS outbreak, but at the annual World Health Organisation (WHO) meeting a unanimous resolution of 192 member-states was approved calling for the full support of all countries to control SARS which is "a serious threat to the stability and growth of economies, the livelihood of populations". The resolution recognised SARS as the first severe infectious disease to emerge in the 21st century[2]. The first mentioning of infectious disease as a global security threat one could find in the report of UN Secretary-General K. Annan of 2005[3].

On 18 September 2014, the SC adopted resolution 2177 (on Ebola outbreak), co-sponsored by the biggest number of countries in the SC history: 130. The resolution stated, "the unprecedented extent of the Ebola outbreak in Africa constitutes a threat to international peace and security", it "may lead to further instances of civil unrest, social tensions and deterioration of political and security climate"[4]. This conclusion

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[2]Annual UN health forum adopts resolution calling for support to control SARS [Electronic resource]. URL: https://news.un.org/en/story/2003/5/69292-annual-un-health-forum-adopts-reso;ution-calling-support-control-sars (date of access: 16.05.2020).
[3]Report of the Secretary-General (Kofi Annan). UNGA A/59/2005/Add. 3. 26 May 2005.
[4]Resolution 2177 [Electronic resource]. URL: unscr.com/en/resolutions/2177 (date of access: 10.05.2020).

emanated from the fact that the ability of the domestic health care systems was not sufficient to respond to the outbreak. The outbreak also handicapped the post-conflict rehabilitation processes in West Africa. It's worth mentioning that delegates, who took the floor during the discussion of the Ebola resolution, did not support the isolation of the infected countries. S. Power, the US ambassador to UN, mentioned that "isolation is effective and indeed necessary for dealing with individuals who may have been exposed to Ebola, it is utterly counterproductive when applied to entire countries" [1]. Resolution 2177 itself called on the member states (para 4) "to lift general travel and border restrictions imposed as a result of the Ebola outbreak and also calls on airlines and shipping companies to maintain trade and transport links with the affected countries and the wider region"[5]. The SC involvement in countering the threat of infectious diseases was repeated in 2018 when the Ebola outbreak was registered in the Democratic Republic of Congo: the relevant resolution 2439 was adopted by the SC on 30 October.

Why the measures envisaged in Ebola resolution contradict largely the isolationist policies of the majority of the states during the coronavirus pandemic? It's a complicated question that could be partly answered if we look at the place of origin of COVID-19. Chinese city Wuhan was completely isolated in China and every family in the city was placed under strict quarantine. All country was placed under quarantine measures, curfews, and so on. In the Chinese authoritarian political system, it was possible to do this in a fast and effective manner. The world media that has today previously unseen powers and enjoys enormous political influence presented the Wuhan experience as the only effective way to deal with COVID-19 pandemic. The media ostracised the governments that did not follow the Chinese example (Belarus, Sweden). Political leaders of the Western countries facing regular re-elections in 2–4 years' term were utterly afraid of being accused of not fighting the pandemic aggressively enough. Under the media pressure, they mostly opted for the Wuhan practices.

Security Council vis-à-vis the coronavirus pandemic

Following the tradition of the SC involvement in countering the threat of infectious diseases in the 21st century, France and Tunisia introduced in March 2020 a draft resolution in the SC that called for the international support to the countries most affected by the coronavirus pandemic and urged a halt to fighting in Afghanistan and Yemen as they struggle to cope with COVID-19. The draft did not go through the SC because some of its languages were not to the US liking. Frustrated by the SC inaction in relation to the pandemic UN Secretary-General A. Guterres issued on 23 March his own appeal for global peace, he urged warring parties across the world to agree to a ceasefire in response to COVID-19: "Our world faces a common enemy: COVID-19. The virus does not care about nationality or ethnicity, faction, or faith. It attacks all, relentlessly... That is why today, I am calling for an immediate global ceasefire in all corners of the world"[6]. But even the appeal of the UN Secretary-General did not become a basis for debates in the SC on the international situation caused by the coronavirus (nevertheless, A. Guterres's appeal made it easier for the UN PSOs' personnel to assist the governments and the populations of the relevant countries in fighting the coronavirus pandemic).

Some experts from Asia and Africa underlined that this SC's "inaction" was not at all accidental, that Chinese diplomats (PRC's ambassador Zhang Jun chaired SC in March 2020) did not want to allow their country to be accused of giving birth to a pandemic that had become the threat to international peace and security [4].

In May 2020, under the Estonian SC chairmanship, Germany and Estonia introduced another draft resolution on COVID-19 pandemic, and again it fell victim to the SC permanent members' bickering. China promised that it would veto any resolution that would not mention the WHO, and Washington assured that it would veto any that would mention WHO.

The inability of the SC to play even a symbolic role in the consolidation of the world's efforts badly damaged the United Nations' image. In fact, "we" (world community) did not fight COVID-19, the nation states did rely mostly on its own recourses. The reciprocal accusations of Beijing and Washington in spreading coronavirus underlined very vividly the new axis of confrontation in modern world politics – between the PRC and the USA. This new confrontation has been added up to an "old" one: between the Russian Federation and the West. They both paralysed the work of the SC. At the SC meeting on 28 May 2020, J. Borrell, EU high representative for foreign and security policy, stated: "At a time of global crisis, we need a Security Council able to take the necessary decisions – and not one that is paralysed by vetoes and political infighting"[7].

The SC was primarily set up to deal with armed conflicts that threaten international peace and security. The COVID-19 pandemic is not exactly an armed conflict but, in our opinion, there are a number of compelling reasons why the SC should have acted against coronavirus.

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[5]Resolution 2177 [Electronic resource]. URL: unscr.com/en/resolutions/2177 (date of access: 10.05.2020).

[6]Secretary-General's appeal for global ceasefire [Electronic resource]. URL: https://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-03-23/secretary-generals-appeal-for-global-ceasefire (date of access: 05.05.2020).

[7]Amid COVID-19, strong multinational system key to delivering for world's most vulnerable, European Union foreign policy chief tells Security Council [Electronic resourse]. URL: https://www.un.org/press/en/2020/sc14197.doc.htm (date of access: 16.06.2020).

First of all, there have already been precedents when the SC adopted resolutions on the situations caused by the infectious diseases (HIV/AIDS, Ebola), and infectious disease had been already mentioned by a UN Secretary-General as a global security threat. Therefore, a SC resolution on COVID-19 would have been not an exception but a logical continuation of this UN tradition.

Secondly, the very magnitude of the pandemic with over 30 million effected and a million innocent men, women, and children dead in about 200 countries and territories all over the world is a sufficient enough reason for the SC to be involved.

Thirdly, the pandemic demonstrated itself as a truly trans-border global issue that can not be dealt with only by nation-states' own efforts, but only through an international coordinating mechanism.

Fourthly, the pandemic breeds social discontent, racial and civil unrest (look at the "Black lives matter" movement acquiring international character and getting more and more radicalised) that in its part may lead to local and trans-border conflicts, including the armed ones.

Fifthly, the pandemic had a really devastating impact on the national economies of different states, some of which do not have enough resources to remedy the situation and destined for years and years of economic stagnation with all its social and political consequences (poverty, social tension, the rise of populism and authoritarian tendencies, and so on).

On 22 September 2020, UN Secretary-General A. Guterres delivered his annual report on the work of the organisation to the 75th session of the UN General Assembly. Once more he asked for a global ceasefire at the face of COVID-19 and underlined the necessity of the SC leading role in consolidating the world efforts to fight the pandemic. "I appeal, – he said, – for a stepped-up international effort – led by the Security Council – to achieve a global ceasefire by the end of this year"[8]. Unfortunately it is very doubtful that even after this passionate appeal, the SC permanent members will put aside their differences and let the Council find a consensus and start playing an active role in mobilising world resources in fighting the common enemy.

Conclusion

As it seems, the UN business will go on as usual in the third decade of the 21st century. The PSOs will be conducted in the local conflicts that do not directly touch upon the interests of the global and regional power centers. The confrontation of these centres in the SC will swart the attempts to consolidate the world community in countering the global challenges.

The continuation of the UN business "as usual" is determined by a combination of two reasons. On one side, there is a growing dissatisfaction with the current UN position. On the other side, certain expectations remain, especially among small and medium-size countries, that the UN machinery could defend their interests vis-à-vis the world power centres.

The downgrading of the UN role in world affairs vividly expressed itself during the coronavirus pandemic. Subsequently, the SC inaction in the face of COVID-19 negatively affected the UN image and its influence in the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions. More often than not the SC had to hand over the responsibility of resolving the conflicts to regional organisations. The latter unilaterally expand the terms and conditions of the mandates received. This was the case with NATO in Yugoslavia, with the African Union in Sudan, and with the EU in Kosovo and Libya.

At the beginning of the 21st century, most of the security issues in the Euro-Atlantic region is decided upon by NATO, not the UN SC. The probable resumption of negotiations between the USA and the EU on the Trans-Atlantic Trade and Investment Partnership will allow lying down a solid foundation for managing Euro-Atlantic conflicts under the Washington and Brussels aegis.

In Eurasia, the UN SC traditionally was not heavily involved in managing security problems. The situation in the field of Eurasian security mostly depended upon the positions of four major power centres: PRC, EU, USA, and Russian Federation. The SC's inability to deploy a UN PSO in Ukraine after 2014 vividly underlined this supposition. Such regional organisations in the Eurasian space as Collective Security Treaty Organisation and Eurasian Economic Union can not decisively influence the reform processes in Eurasia. The concept of the Great Eurasian Partnership promoted by Moscow neither enjoys the political consensus of its potential participants nor has a solid financial foundation. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative remains the only real project aimed at strengthening Eurasian security by creating transportation and other ties among the countries of the region. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's (SCO) inactivity, especially after India and Pakistan joined its ranks, more and more becomes the rule, not the exception. At best, the SCO could perform the role of a bodyguard for the BRI.

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