

Foreign Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: The UK at the United Nations Security Council, HC 930

Monday 23 June 2025

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Members present: Emily Thornberry (Chair); Alex Ballinger; Dan Carden; Uma Kumaran; Blair McDougall; Abtisam Mohamed; Edward Morello; and Sir John Whittingdale.

Questions 1 to 36

Witnesses

I: Sir Mark Lyall Grant, former UK Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the United Nations.

Examination of witness

Witness: Sir Mark Lyall Grant.

Q1 **Chair:** This is the Foreign Affairs Committee's session on the United Nations and Britain's role at the UN Security Council—we have an inquiry at the moment, and a witness to help us with our investigations. I wondered whether you would be kind enough to tell us your name and your previous role.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: My name is Mark Lyall Grant. I was a former diplomat and National Security Adviser, but for the purposes of this inquiry, I was the British ambassador and permanent representative at the United Nations for five and a half years between 2009 and 2015.

Q2 **Chair:** Thank you for coming in; we appreciate it. As you know, we have been to the United States, to New York, and we spoke to a number of people about Britain's role and what we do. We got a fairly strong impression, but we want to hear from you as well. Within the UN system, where is the UK most valued? Where do we make the biggest contribution?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: In the United Nations as a whole, we try to make a contribution across the entire family—in New York, Geneva and other parts of the world where the UN is based. But, obviously, our role as a permanent member of the Security Council gives us a particular platform to exert influence and to try to achieve things.

Of the five permanent members—certainly in my time, but I do not suppose it has changed—the United Kingdom was seen as the most helpful to the United Nations system, the most respected by the UN Secretary-General, and the one country that believed the most in the international rule of law and in multilateralism more generally.

It is fair to say that there is not a great deal of competition, in the sense that Russia and China never played that role—not in the Security Council anyway—and the United States sort of vacillates between being more multilateralist and less multilateralist over the years. Only the UK and France are seen as progressive and helpful to the UN system as a whole, and because of our particular role, if you were to ask the UN Secretary-General, he would probably say the UK pulled more weight than France in these areas.

Q3 **Chair:** In relation to what the Secretary-General did say to us, he did not make reference to France, but certainly we were very popular with the UN, as far as I could see, because of the work that we are doing on the Security Council and because we are multilateralists, observe the rule of law and want to uphold international institutions. Your assessment from your time accords pretty closely with the impression that we got, and it seems as though our role is even more needed at a time like this. Is there anything that you feel that the UK could do to strengthen the UN

specifically, and the multilateral system more widely, at this time of such challenge?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: In the UN Security Council, it is a matter of power politics. The United Nations as a whole is an intergovernmental body, so it is not like the European Union; it does not have legal personality. Therefore, it is only as strong as the weakest one of the P5. At the moment, it is polarised again, for obvious reasons: Ukraine and the Middle East. That happened throughout the cold war and then started happening again around 2013, '14 and '15. Looking back, I would say that the United Nations system had a golden age, and that golden age lasted really only 25 years.

Q4 **Chair:** When was that?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Between 1989—the fall of the Berlin wall—and 2014 or '15. For that period, we can look at the developments at the United Nations in terms of both the normative and the legislative gains and the number of UN peacekeeping missions that were established. The Human Rights Council and the International Criminal Court were established, and you got a huge advance in women's rights and LGBT rights. You got the conventional arms trade treaty and the open skies treaty. All these developments happened in that period at the end of the cold war as things were freed up and the paralysis of the cold war, which had lasted more than 40 years, came to an end.

What was interesting about all the developments during that period was that every single one went in a rights-based direction and was initiated by the west. That includes concepts like humanitarian intervention and responsibility to protect—all the issues that I have mentioned were initiated by the west, and all went in a rights-based direction. Although there was opposition to that, even at the time, from the status quo powers—like Russia, China to some extent, and one or two others—they were not in a position, or they decided not, to oppose all those developments. But gradually, towards the end of that 25-year period, we got a more systemic pushback against the new developments, against this rules-based order.

Q5 **Chair:** When did you say the end of the period was—2004?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: No, a bit later—somewhere between 2011 and 2015, I would suggest, and I think there were a number of reasons for it. Many developing countries felt that the military interventions in Iraq and Libya went beyond protection of civilians and towards imposing democracy, and regime change even. That was a concern. You had the 2008-09 financial crisis, which undermined general faith in the elites' ability to manage global capitalism. And of course you had the geostrategic changes at the same time with the rise of China, which put some pressure on the existing system.

I was able to map that, as I was at the UN at precisely that time, and I was very struck by one episode in 2015, which I always remember. We wanted to celebrate the 20th anniversary of something called the



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programme of action. This was a very basic consensus document on women's rights. It was clear in 2015 that not only would it not be possible to celebrate with any great consensus and enthusiasm the 20th anniversary of this document, but that it would not be possible to negotiate that document in 2015 that had been agreed in China 20 years earlier. That was the extent of the pushback by 2015, and that is why I judge the beginning of a more systematic pushback to be from around 2011, '12 or '13.

Q6 Chair: I will just ask you one more question, because I think this is a bit of a rabbit hole. I always thought that one of the many arguments against the Iraq war was the way in which it undermined the United Nations and its status, because the war happened without its agreement and there seemed to be a fracturing of its leadership over whether to get involved.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Obviously, there are political arguments about that, but undoubtedly the effect it had—when weapons of mass destruction were not found in Iraq—did contribute to this pushback against the rules-based order that we in the west had initiated. Had those weapons been found, I do not think it would have had the same dramatic effect that perhaps it did.

Q7 Dan Carden: Thank you for joining us today, Sir Mark. How well do you think the FCDO's priorities here in London are communicated and carried out by the office in the UN?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: It is a very constant two-way dialogue, so I think "extremely well" is the answer. I say it is two-way because, although the theory is that London sets the strategy and UKMIS New York sets the tactics, there are obviously recommendations for strategy coming from New York, and endorsement or disagreement with tactics coming from London. It is absolutely an organic process—there is dialogue, emails, telegrams, everything—every single day between the two.

Of course, it is not just the FCDO. Even now that it has embraced DFID, as it was, there is Defence, DEFRA and other Government Departments, and the FCDO is the docking point, if you like, for the UK mission, and it is its responsibility to clear policy lines with whoever in Whitehall they need to be cleared with. UKMIS New York would rely on the Foreign Office to perform that particular role.

Everything that is done in New York is done with the agreement of the Foreign Office. For instance, if we are having a presidency roughly every 15 months, we would start thinking about priorities for our presidency four or five months in advance. We would make some suggestions from New York, and London would say, "Actually, we want to focus on women, peace and security, or children in armed conflict," or whatever as well, and then we would factor that into our programme for that particular month.

When you have the presidency, you have a little more discretion to set the agenda than you would normally in the Security Council; it is not complete, but it is possible.

Q8 **Dan Carden:** We see week in, week out, that there is a lot happening at the United Nations. You say we have had its golden age. Do you think what happens at the United Nations still matters as much to the UK Government?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Certainly it matters a great deal, because we are believers in the multilateral system. We, as a leading middle power in the world, and as an open, democratic trading nation, depend both for our prosperity and our security on a rules-based international order. Without that, we will suffer both economically and in security terms. The UN is the key body that oversees international peace and security, so yes, it is important.

Dan Carden: Can I pick up on something you said earlier about the popularity of the UK, say, with the UN Secretariat? That is not the same as being effective in influencing world affairs. Do you think that, as we see a decline in the influence of the United Nations, the UK perhaps needs to think now about how it can be better and more effective in influencing world affairs, not just through the UN Secretariat but more widely?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: A hundred per cent. I am not suggesting that the UN is the only prism through which we can exert our influence. It is extremely important because we are one of only five countries with permanent status, and you cannot overestimate the importance of that reality, but that does not mean that we should not use NATO, the G7, the G20, the Commonwealth and all the other organisations that we are members of.

As I understand it, we are still members of more international organisations than any other single country, and we should use those as part of the minilateral or multilateral system. It is just that the UN is the only body of which all 193 countries are permanent¹ members and are there the whole time, so it is an extremely important environment even when it is paralysed, as it was during the cold war, and it is very polarised at the moment.

Q9 **Dan Carden:** How often would you speak to the Foreign Secretary and Ministers? What advice would you give to Ministers and to people at the UN so that they can be as effective as possible in what are currently very troubling times?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: You are talking about now, not when I was there.

Dan Carden *indicated assent.*

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Well, I do not think Ministers need any particular advice on that—I am sure they are getting it from Dame Barbara Woodward, who is currently my successor there. If the Security Council is paralysed or polarised, it is obviously less able to make an impact, and we have to find other ways to do things. As I say, we can do that through

¹ Note by witness: When saying “all 193 countries are permanent members”, I misspoke. What I mean to say was “all 193 countries are members”.



other organisations, and bilaterally as well. But that does not mean that we should not use the UN Security Council to try to make progress on various conflicts around the world, and to maintain the sanctions regimes, the political missions and the peacekeeping missions.

We can also use it to draw attention to particular crises. Ukraine is a very good example. I was in New York when the annexation of Crimea took place. In the following 18 months or so for which I was there, we had 27 Security Council meetings. It was virtually impossible to agree any product from them, but having those meetings was a way of putting pressure on Russia and highlighting what Russia was doing in terms of the annexation of Crimea. You can say it is often performative, but it plays a role in making sure that issues are not swept under the carpet or not exposed to the spotlight.

Q10 Alex Ballinger: I should declare that I am the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on conflict prevention.

Last week saw the launch of the Global Peace Index, which is in its 19th year, and it said things that I think no one here would be surprised by. There are currently more separate state conflicts than at any other time since the second world war. I found it interesting that only 4% of conflicts in the last decade were resolved through a peace agreement, which is a record low. Do you have any reflections on the effectiveness of the UN's peacebuilding apparatus—the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs—and on whether the defunding and future reduction we are hearing about from the American Administration will have an even greater impact?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Thank you for the question; it is a very important aspect of conflict prevention. One of my big frustrations during my time in New York was the absence of really effective conflict-prevention mechanisms. Everyone paid lip service to conflict prevention; no one was prepared to really endorse it. It was left largely to the UN Secretariat, and particularly to the Department of Political Affairs, as it was then, to work behind the scenes with the tacit, sometimes explicit, support of the Security Council to try to resolve conflicts as they arose.

I particularly remember an example from 2011 that highlights the problem. It was during the Arab spring, and you will recall that there were big demonstrations in Tahrir square in Egypt, plus all the conflicts elsewhere. We had a horizon-scanning meeting—this was something I initiated at the time, so that once a month, instead of looking at a particular issue, we would scan the horizon and say, "What are the risks?"—and I raised Egypt. I said I was very concerned about the situation in Egypt and that we should keep our eye on it. The following day the British ambassador in Cairo was summoned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and told, "How dare the British ambassador raise the issue of Egypt in the Security Council? Egypt is not on the agenda of the Security Council and is not a threat to international peace and security."



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Unfortunately, the processes of the Security Council mean that you do not get on to the agenda until there is already a crisis. It makes it very difficult to do effective conflict prevention if you cannot look beyond the horizon at crises that are obviously coming. No one wants to be a subject of the agenda on the UN Security Council. That is why you rely on the Secretariat to do that work behind the scenes.

Q11 **Chair:** It is also difficult if you are calling out a potential conflict. Perhaps it does not happen, or by calling it out you can have an influence on it.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: There is a corollary of that. The agenda of the Security Council includes the question of Hyderabad, but there has not been a meeting on the question of Hyderabad on the agenda since 1947 and partition between India and Pakistan. Every year I wrote to the Pakistan ambassador and said, "Do you not think it is time that we drop this item from the Security Council?" And he said, "Absolutely not", because it was a way of keeping the issue alive and poking the Indians, if you like.

So it is quite difficult to update the UN Security Council agenda until there is a real crisis. For instance, we discussed Myanmar when I was there because it was quite clear which direction Myanmar was going, but it was only in 2022 that we got agreement to bring Myanmar to the UN Security Council and get it properly discussed. The Chinese at the time said, "Nothing to do here. We will sort Myanmar ourselves."

Q12 **Alex Ballinger:** I think we can all agree that the UN Security Council has become much worse at conflict prevention, with the Americans and the Russians becoming quite obstructive. There are other actors outside the UN system, though. NGOs do a lot of work on the ground. There is a risk at the moment, with the Americans stepping away and the UK reducing our investment in ODA, that those types of organisations will lose support. If the international community moves away from supporting on-the-ground peacebuilding NGOs, is there a risk that it will become an even more dangerous world and that conflict will increase even more?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: There must be a risk of that. We have to distinguish between the regular budgets of the United Nations and the peacekeeping budgets of the United Nations, which are mandatory payments and therefore countries have no discretion—they pay their whack.

We are the fifth largest payer to both of those two budgets. In the past, there have been occasions when America has withheld its main contribution to the UN and caused quite a crisis, but that has always been resolved and back payments made. But that does not apply to voluntary payments to bodies that are not part of the fixed UN budget. If funding to them is reduced, which it is being if it is not replaced by other countries, that will have an impact on the ground. There is no getting away from that.

Q13 **Sir John Whittingdale:** Sir Mark, can I start with a more general question? When we met the Secretary-General, he gave the impression of



being tired and fed up, perhaps because during his tenure as Secretary-General two major conflicts have happened and the UN has seemed powerless to do anything about either of them. Since we met him, the one in the Middle East has escalated dramatically. There was a meeting of the UN Security Council, but there does not seem to be any role being played by the UN Security Council in trying to reach settlements. So my first question is: is the whole credibility of the UN being undermined by its lack of power to influence these conflicts?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: There has always been a risk of that. The old joke is that the Secretary-General is more secretary than general, and that has always been the case. As I mentioned at the beginning, it is an intergovernmental body. It does not have legal personality. In the European Union, the Commission can override certain member states—on qualified majority voting, for instance—and therefore has the ability to push the agenda much harder than the UN Secretary-General does.

It is only relatively recently—maybe in the last 25 or 30 years—that the Secretary-General has even spoken first in the UN Security Council meetings. Before that, all 15 members would speak, and then the Secretariat would speak. Now, the Secretariat has become the sixth permanent member, so it is always important to think about six permanent members because the Secretariat is now always there and normally introduces the debate.

That gives the Secretary-General some authority. And, of course, the very fact that he is elected by all member states gives him a certain amount of status and authority. But, if some of the major powers in the world do not listen to what he says and are dismissive of his role, undoubtedly there is nothing that he can do about that; he has to try to reach consensus among at least the permanent members of the Security Council.

So, yes, it is deeply frustrating for the current Secretary-General, I am sure, but that is not for the first time in the UN's history, unfortunately, because, as I mentioned, we have only really had 25 out of 80 years when you could say that the UN system, and particularly the Security Council, has been firing on all cylinders.

Q14 **Sir John Whittingdale:** You referred to the mandatory donations to the UN budget; you included peacekeeping as one that member states are required to fund, but the US has refused now. I heard what you said about reaching a settlement in due course and finding a way, but it seems to be that the US is playing a much smaller role there, and, at the same time, other fora are being created to discuss potential ways forward. I am thinking of Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, all of which have been hosting international agreements; would you not have thought that that's actually what the UN should be doing?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Not necessarily. I was not aware that the Americans have withheld their mandatory contributions to the UN peacekeeping budget, or to the regular budget. That would be a worrying development. As I say, it has happened occasionally in the past for short

periods, but I am not aware that that has happened yet—of course, it still might.

The relationship between the United Nations and the regional organisations was actually one of the most tricky issues to manage while I was there, because the UN does want to devolve responsibility to some of these regional organisations to solve the conflicts at a more local level. That is actually a welcome development, such as with the Arab League, or the Gulf Co-operation Council, looking at Arab issues.

The African Union has also set up its Peace and Security Council in Addis Ababa, modelled on the UN Security Council. It has 15 members, rotates in roughly the same way, and so on. The Africans themselves said, “We want African solutions to African problems,” and the UN Security Council was always very happy for that to happen, except for the Russians, perhaps. The Russians were always furious, because they said, “You can’t usurp the authority of the UN Security Council.” where, of course, they have a veto, and they don’t in Africa.

The bigger problem for a country like the United Kingdom was not so much that, but that Africa did not speak with one voice. You have the African Union, but then you have ECOWAS in west Africa, for instance, which took a completely different view on crises in Mali and Côte d’Ivoire from the African Union as a whole. For the UN Security Council, how do you respond to that? Do you take the advice from the regional² body or from the continental body? We saw the same thing with the crisis in Libya, where the Arab League was pushing for action in the UN Security Council, calling for a no-fly zone and calling for Gaddafi to be overthrown, but the African Union said, “No, no, don’t do that.” And, of course, Libya was a member of both the African Union and the Arab League.

When you get either two regional organisations or a regional organisation and a sub-regional organisation that do not agree, it is difficult for the Security Council to operate. But I think the principle of not every conflict being resolved at the centre, if you like, in New York, is a good one, and a bit of devolution to some local responsibility—local ownership of the problem—is a good trend.

Q15 Chair: Before we move to Blair, who I know wants to ask you about China, you talked about the golden age; wasn’t there a time when the United Nations recognised the Government in Taiwan as the Government of China, rather than the Government of the mainland? Is that right?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Yes; you are going back quite a long time.

Q16 Chair: That had an impact on what happened in relation to Korea. If we are talking about dysfunction, there has been quite dramatic dysfunction in relation to the Security Council, possibly even something to rival the dysfunction in the Security Council now.

² Note by witness: When saying “regional body”, I misspoke. What I meant to say was “sub-regional body”.



Sir Mark Lyall Grant: It is true that there was a recognition of Taiwan originally, and then when the People's Republic of China sort of grew up, it was more natural to see it as the big power, and it became the permanent member of the Security Council in the same way that when the Soviet Union broke up, Russia adopted the seat without any real process in the UN Security Council. There was no vote on that; Russia just said, "We'll take over the seat", and everyone nodded their heads.

Q17 **Chair:** There was a bit more aggro, though, between Taiwan and China over who had the seat, I think. Is that right?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: It was before my time.

Q18 **Blair McDougall:** Sir Mark, can I ask about the growing role of China and Russia? We have seen Putin in the last few days offering himself as a peacemaker with regard to Iran, which is slightly ironic, but we have also seen the Chinese setting up this their own international multilateral organisation for peacemaking. To follow on from Alex's questions about the impact of ODA cuts there, do you worry, as the west and western countries are exiting much of the developed world, that China and Russia are entering it and using these alternative institutions to undermine the United Nations further?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: That is a very big question. The Security Council is very much a power³ dynamic. The rest of the UN is more soft power. That leads to very different dynamics in the Security Council. Things have changed a little bit, but in the five and a half years that I was there, it is fair to say that Russia was completely dominant over China in the UN Security Council. The Chinese essentially played very little role indeed, except to mouth slogans about peace, stability, sovereignty, non-intervention and dialogue in whatever issue was being discussed.

I do not think that the Chinese had a single initiative in the Security Council in the five and a half years I was in New York. Russia was the complete opposite; it was firing off initiatives in all directions. They were mostly deeply unhelpful to the west, but sometimes they were helpful. For instance, on things like piracy, it did some joint work with the United States, and on some of the counter-terrorism work, you could work with the Russians, but most of the time it was unhelpful. However, they were very, very active, and China would just tuck in behind Russia.

We saw that when it came to Syria: the Chinese ambassador had agreed the text, but eventually agreed to veto it alongside the Russians, because the Russians at the highest level asked them to veto it alongside them. That was just an example of them vetoing to keep Russia from being isolated on that dossier.

If you go outside the Security Council, it is a very different picture. The Russians are completely absent. They have no interest in the UN apart from the Security Council. The Chinese are very active, including getting

³ Note by witness: When saying "power dynamic", I misspoke. What I meant to say was "hard power dynamic".



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some of their people into the UN agencies as heads of the agencies. That is where they use their influence in what is still called the G77 plus China, at which China plays the card of being a poor developing country when everyone knows that obviously that is not really the case any more. None the less, they get a lot of leverage. It is fair to say that while Russia has virtually no natural friends at the UN, China has a lot of friends, and that is where it exerts its influence.

Coming to your question, if we the west are not contesting that space in the soft power areas as much as we were, the beneficiary will undoubtedly be China. I want to be clear that the cuts in ODA by the Americans, the British Government and others do not impact the Security Council itself—the peacekeeping missions and so on—because that is a different dynamic. But once you start talking about the belt and road process and the Chinese controlling 100 ports—50 civilian ports in Africa alone—that is a way of exerting their influence outside the UN bodies.

Q19 Abtisam Mohamed: I would like to ask a question in relation to Yemen, and the UK being the penholder for Yemen. I should declare that I am one of the officers on the APPG for Yemen, as well as the first Yemeni person to be elected to British politics.

My question is about the humanitarian situation. The fact is that it has stayed the same, if not got worse, over the years. The UK as penholder has not really taken a leading role, and there has been little to no movement on the ground. The peace process is being led by Oman, in partnership with the Saudis who are negotiating with the Houthis, and the legitimate Government of Yemen are not being involved in the discussions. What more could the UK have done as the penholder, and could we have had more leverage in the region to ensure a proper peace process in Yemen?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I should declare an interest as well, as I was educated in Yemen—Aden at the time. Yemen was a huge dossier when I was at the UN. We took over the pen during that time and we pushed through a number of resolutions, including the notorious—or famous—2216, which authorised the regional military intervention in Yemen.

Everything that we did in Yemen, we did in consultation, at the request of the UN special envoy for Yemen and the regional body—normally the GCC. Although we had the pen in Yemen, despite the historical connection, we never had a huge amount of direct influence. Yes, we had a mission there, but it was not a huge mission. We did not give a huge amount of aid to Yemen, but we took the responsibility of the pen and we tried to help the UN system resolve the growing conflict.

The special envoy for Yemen would come to me and say, “Look. I’m having trouble with this negotiating process.” He was leading very extensive negotiations with all parties; they were with not just the Government and the opposition—the Houthis—but all civil society. He was bringing them all together and trying to find a way through the crisis, and he said, “I need your help. You need to put more pressure on the



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President. Can you impose a sanctions regime? Can you use the UN Security Council to do that?" We said, "Yes, we will respond positively to that," and we drafted the resolutions in order to do that. It was the GCC that pushed very hard for 2216 in order to get backing for the military intervention that it decided, in the end, was necessary because the Houthis had moved so fast and so quickly to take control of the country.

It was not that we were operating on behalf of narrow British interests in that pen-holding role; we were operating as penholder on behalf of the international community, the regional bodies and the UN system. That is how we saw it. Others may see it differently, but that is what motivated us. In all the resolutions we drafted and had adopted, we would be co-penholder with the UAE or any other Arab members on the Council. We would not do anything that had not been agreed with Saudi Arabia, for instance, and others in the region. We were very much responding.

- Q20 **Abtisam Mohamed:** Do you think our position was compromised at any point because of the interests we had with Saudi Arabia? With one hand we were funding arms for Saudi Arabia, and with the other we were trying to formulate a peace process in a region in which Saudi had an interest. Do you think there was a conflict in terms of us holding the pen?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I do not recall that ever being an issue, because there was no one really arguing on the other side. The Houthis did not have any supporters apart from Iran. Yes, the Russians were nervous about authorising military action because of what had happened in in Libya, for instance, but they agreed.

One of the reasons that we were able to get through resolutions in the Security Council, which we were not able to get through on Syria for example, was because neither Russia nor China had a vested national interest in Yemen. Therefore, although they were nervous about what we were trying to do or what the region was trying to do, they did not feel that they had to veto that action, which the Russians had vetoed, of course, on Syria and had begun to veto on Libya. That is one of the reasons why we were able to make some progress.

It is important not to exaggerate the power that the penholder has; you still have to get agreement around the Council. Although there may have been one or two of the resolutions or products of the Council on Yemen where the initiation came from the UK—from us in New York or from London—the majority would have come from, as I say, the UN system itself, the UN Secretariat, or the regions saying, "You are the penholder. Can you help us by pushing the Council in this direction?"

- Q21 **Abtisam Mohamed:** I have a final question. Do you think that the UK should continue as penholder for Yemen, or allow other countries that perhaps have more have more expertise or lean-in to take over?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I do not know which country that would be. As I say, the penholding is a very haphazard sort of business. And it is, let's be honest, pretty arbitrary. The P3 hold the pen on 70% of the agenda items. Why? Because Russia and China have no interest in doing it.



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It is important to distinguish between the P3—who take a proactive approach towards the UN, i.e. they want to get things done through the UN system—and Russia and China, who are status quo powers and are basically there to stop things happening, for different reasons. But both Russia and China are in that position and are largely still in that position today. That rules out any of the other P5.

Other members come on for two years and then they come off. I think that if we offered them the pen on Yemen, most of them would run a mile, because we often tried to encourage other elected members to hold the pen, but they were very reluctant to do so, because there is a lot of work involved; you need a very good drafting team, and so on. It is not all straightforward.

Also, particularly if there is an issue that is divisive, the country may not want to get involved. Lebanon was a good example. We brought Lebanon in to co-penhold when it came to Libya—it was us, the French and the Lebanese. But that was because of the particular character of the Lebanese ambassador, who said, “Doesn’t matter what my capital says. I want to be involved in this process.” However, his capital was extremely nervous, because any way he voted was going to upset someone on one side of the divide or the other. A lot of P5⁴ members are in that situation. When it comes to African issues, you offer the penholdership to an African country, but they often say, “No, sorry, we’d rather not do it.”

I do not think that the British Government are going to die in a ditch to keep the pen on Yemen—it has not been an easy dossier by any means and it creates a huge amount of work—but I do not think there would be anyone clamouring to take it, to be honest.

Q22 Chair: The problem in relation to Yemen, certainly in the recent past, has been the bombing campaign by Saudi Arabia and its somewhat indiscriminate nature, frankly; it certainly seemed indiscriminate for the people on the ground. Although there seemed to be two centres where the planes took off from—one that the foreign visitors were shown and another one further in the south in the desert—the targeting was not what it ought to be. There was farmland, milk plants, people standing at wells, funerals and marriages being bombed, and there was a huge amount of civilian deaths.

Pressure was being put on by campaigners—frankly, including me—and by NGOs for the British to pass a resolution at the Security Council ensuring that the Saudi Arabians were held to account and that there were proper investigations. I have no idea whether it is right, but word was that the Saudis were very close to the British when it came to the drafting of that, and a motion was withdrawn.

Those are the rumours that go around. Given that Britain was selling arms and armaments to Saudi Arabia to the extent that we were, there was a feeling at the time that we could not produce enough ammunition for the

⁴ Note by witness: When saying “a lot of P5 members”, I misspoke. What I meant to say was “a lot of E10 members”.



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amount that the Saudi Arabians needed in Yemen. For us to be selling the arms to one of the main protagonists while still being in charge of the pen seemed to be not really our finest hour in my view.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I cannot comment on more recent developments, but at the time I was there, that was not the issue. The big issue was not Saudi Arabia's bombing campaign, but the fact that the Houthis were marching on the capital. I led a Security Council mission to Sanaa, and we met the President, the council and the Prime Minister, and they were desperate for the UN Security Council to prevent the Houthis' advance—they had not even taken over Sanaa at that point. Unfortunately, it was too late—or at least, the campaign was not sufficiently effective—and the Houthis still took over the capital.

At a later stage, you have a different problem. I can only comment in respect of my time as National Security Adviser, when I went to Saudi Arabia on my own and with two Prime Ministers, and on every single occasion we were urging the Saudis to ensure that their targeting was effective and that they were not indiscriminately bombing and killing civilians. It was a big issue for the British Government to pursue. I do not think one should reduce Yemen to a single issue of "It's the problem of the Saudis"; the problem was the Houthis, not the Saudis.

Chair: I understand.

- Q23 **Edward Morello:** Sir Mark, I am interested in your views on the role of the Secretary-General versus the UN Security Council. The current Secretary-General is coming up to 18 months or a year left on his second and final term. In your mind, is there a benefit to having a more activist Secretary-General who is more willing to impose themselves on global events? Is that in the interest of the UK on the Security Council? Would other members of the P5 like a more activist Secretary-General, or would they object to one?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I think the British Government would be very supportive of the most active and vigorous UN Secretary-General possible, but that is not true of other permanent members, including, traditionally, the United States. You get the Secretary-General you deserve in a sense, because all permanent members have to agree. That is why you do not always get maybe the top person. It used to be the case that it was a regional rotation as well, which limited it. In fact, we have virtually moved away from that now.

There have been a lot of initiatives through the General Assembly to change the process of selecting a Secretary-General, but we have not yet got rid of the fact that all permanent members have to agree on a Secretary-General. We will have that problem going forward as well, but certainly the British Government in my time, and I am sure today, would like to have an activist and very involved Secretary-General.

- Q24 **Edward Morello:** Last week, I think, the Italian Foreign Minister was on record questioning the relevance of the United Nations. I wonder if that is intrinsically tied to the fact that we currently have a Secretary-General



who perhaps is not of the activist mould—and is a bit more passive in international events—and whether it is to the Security Council's benefit to have somebody on the stage who feels like the UN is more involved in global events.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I think that is a little unfair on the current Secretary-General, António Guterres because, as the Chair said at the beginning, he has inherited two major conflicts—or they have sprung up during his time. The UN is seen by many people as only involved in international peace and security, and the reputation rises and falls based on how it responds to that. I think he has perhaps been more proactive than Ban Ki-moon but less proactive than Kofi Annan, but they were both operating in slightly different times. At the time, I think he was seen to be an extremely good choice. As I say, he is still more Secretary than General; he can lead and use the pulpit to exhort and encourage, but he cannot override the interests of a permanent member state of the UN Security Council—that is the reality of it.

Q25 **Chair:** Can I take you back to penholding, as it is one of the things that people focus on with the Security Council? Your evidence has been very interesting, and it accords with some of things that we heard in New York about the elected countries that go on to the Security Council. They are there for only a short period of time and do not seem to come forward to take the pen in the same way. Is there room for improving that? Is there perhaps room for mentoring or giving some assistance to countries that are there for only a short period, so that they can take a more active part in penholding?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Yes, absolutely. The mission in New York offers training and advice to all small-country prospective members of the UN Security Council—it certainly did during my time and I assume that it is still going. Some countries take that up and some do not, and that is a way of helping. We are always there to help and advise a country in responding to events—that is one thing.

Secondly, there are occasions when elected members are sufficiently capable and will take the pen. For instance, when Australia was on the Security Council it took the pen on Afghanistan, and that worked perfectly well. It had a strong enough team in New York to do that. We co-drafted with Australia the response to Malaysia Airlines flight 17, which was shot down by the Russians in 2014. For obvious reasons, Australia had a lot of people onboard and wanted to be involved, so we brought them in to co-chair and co-penhold that issue.

On the Syria humanitarian crisis, it was actually a combination of Australia, Jordan and Luxembourg that took the lead in the penhold and drafted some of the humanitarian access resolutions that actually got adopted, unlike many of the ones that we and the French had adopted⁵ but got vetoed by Russia. We would help them behind the scenes, but

⁵ Note by witness: When saying “the French had adopted”, I misspoke. What I meant to say was “the French had drafted”.



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they led on those issues because they had the capacity to do so. Any member state that comes on, has the capacity and wants to take on a role, can absolutely do so. Of course, they chair all the sanctions committees. That is not always a role they welcome, but no P5 member chairs a sanctions committee to avoid any conflicts of interest, so that is always a role for the elected members—they can play a big role.

This is a slightly wider point, but if I were to say to you that, during my five and a half years, some of the most effective elected members on the Security Council were Luxembourg, Guatemala and Uganda, you would probably be a bit surprised. If the quality of the ambassador is very good, and they are committed and decide what their niche is and focus on that issue, rather than covering a whole range of issues such as the Middle East or Ukraine, where they perhaps cannot influence things very much, they can make a big impact.

A lot of countries do not do that. I could name some big countries that come on the Council and achieve nothing at all because they are too focused on becoming permanent members, rather than actually doing the work. There is a really important role for elected members and the co-penholding, which has developed over time. It started during my time but it has developed a lot, and I think that is a positive development. The British mission will always be open to co-penholding.

Q26 Blair McDougall: I am going to do the terrible thing that people do in these Committees, which is to ask a non-politician a political question. I think back to previous moments of crisis of legitimacy within the United Nations. With Rwanda, there was real anger at the UN and its institutions. Around Iraq, there was anger at the United States and the United Kingdom for perhaps not showing the respect to the UN in the way they should have. With Gaza and Ukraine, there seemed to be more of a sense of despondency because of the polarisation, but in the last few days, with Iran, it is remarkable how absent talk of the importance of the UN's institutions has been in some of the decision making.

I would be interested in your reflections on how we can encourage countries to make the sacrifices they need to make in order to get meaningful reform within the United Nations, especially when, in many ways, the United Nation's profile and the importance of it in political debates is so low.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: That is a very good question. I know we are focusing on the UN Security Council and penholding, which is seen by many people to be what the UN does, but the UN is a massive family, and it does amazing things around the world. It is important that we should never lose sight of the fact that 178 members of the UN are not in the Security Council, and development is the most important issue for most of them.

All the other agencies and bodies of the UN are really important in all sorts of areas, including children's health, promotion of democracy and humanitarian disaster relief, all of which work very well on the whole,



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because they are not hidebound by the veto and what happens in terms of peace and security.

Can we change things when it comes to peace and security? I am pessimistic on that score. As I say, it comes and goes. We had that golden age, and maybe it will come back or there will be another possibility. At the moment, you have two and a half countries that are less enthusiastic about multilateralism and, therefore, the UN. It is not always like that, but at the moment we are going through a particularly bad period.

I am not confident that there will be reform of the Security Council in the near future. We have been talking about it for 25 to 30 years. It has to be agreed by all five permanent members. We should never lose sight of the origins of the UN and why that system is there. It is there because its predecessor, the League of Nations, failed to prevent the second world war. The reason the League of Nations failed was that the big powers did not join it. The United States never ratified the League of Nations and never joined. Germany and Japan joined for a very brief period and left.

The compromise that was struck right at the beginning of the United Nations in order to get every country on board was to give the big powers at the time the veto, and that is what was done. We can bemoan that, but the reality is that if you took away the veto, which, as I say, is not possible because it has to be agreed by the P5, the first country out the door would be Russia, and the United States would probably be the second. It would then go back to being like the League of Nations, where the big powers were not even part of the organisation at all.

It is unfortunate, but it is a compromise that has had to be paid so that all 193 countries are there at the United Nations. That is a very big gain. It is a big price to pay, but I think that it is still a price worth paying.

One useful development that has come about in recent years is that every time a Security Council member uses the veto, they have to go to the UN General Assembly and justify that veto. That is positive. You cannot shame Russia on some of these issues, but none the less, the fact that they have to go there and explain why they vetoed a particular resolution is a valuable development, even if it is not the same as changing the veto.

Q27 Blair McDougall: My worry is that it has become increasingly easy to just ignore what goes on in the United Nations. When you were sitting in your chair, working diligently all hours on these issues, how did it make you feel to see, perhaps, that it was not being voiced in places like this?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: That has always been the case on the big issues. While I was at the Security Council we went to Washington—the 15 ambassadors—and saw President Obama. He said, “The work you do is extremely important and every important issue of peace and security that comes across my desk flows through the United Nations.” We then went to Congress and saw the committees in both the House and the Senate, and they said, “We never discussed the UN, and it does not impinge at all on our thinking.”



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I am afraid that second view reflects more generally the United States under any President. They operate the UN process under sufferance and sometimes use the UN process, but even under different Presidents they are not willing to make the compromises you mentioned to push forward certain dossiers. In the American case, Israel-Palestine is the most significant of those. With President Trump that is exacerbated, but it is a long-standing trend. You are not going to change that with America or Russia.

That does not mean that even with Security Council business nothing happens. Where there are issues that do not impinge on a major power's interests, a lot gets done. We saw that in west and central Africa, and to some extent in east Africa. It used to be the case in Yemen, as I mentioned, and in Sudan to some extent. Those issues have become more complicated since then, but the Security Council has still been able to help in a number of different areas, for instance, on Colombia or Myanmar. It is not hopeless, but it is not a great look for the United Nations, and it is not a great time to be involved in international peace and security. I am sure my successor, who is there now, finds it deeply frustrating, as I found it on occasion; it is probably just on more occasions that she finds it frustrating today.

Q28 Chair: Quite often, people do not hear about successful United Nations' work; it is when it does not work that they hear about it. My father was involved in the mission to Namibia, which was a huge success, and no one ever talks about it.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: Exactly—that was a huge success. We talk about the peacekeeping missions, but there are at least 11 UN political missions. Those are largely led by the Secretariat and do a lot of good work in the conflict prevention area. One frustration from my time was less the fact that the Russians were able to veto this and that, but the fact that we paid lip service to conflict prevention but were not prepared to make the necessary compromises. The effort I put into developing discussion of political conflict prevention at the UN Security Council was extremely difficult. I am afraid that, even then, the country that was the most negative about it was the United States.

Q29 Alex Ballinger: What compromises were we not willing to make?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: The best way of focusing discussion of conflict prevention in the Security Council in a meaningful way, in private—there were some formal documents⁶ where we had public debate—was to do horizon scanning. We introduced that for the first time during the British presidency. Because of the rotation of the Security Council presidency, the United States has the presidency immediately after us. We did horizon scanning; the Americans did not. All the other 14 members picked up the idea for the next 14 months. We then did a second one; the Americans did not. Then, in that cycle, the Russians did not and the Chinese did not.

⁶ Note by witness: When saying "formal documents", I misspoke. What I meant to say was "formal sessions".



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Three cycles on, no one was doing it apart from us and one or two of the other Europeans.

The reason the Americans gave was that if you have an open debate about horizon scanning, everyone will bang on about the Middle East and we will be the target. It is true that the very first one we did, where we did not have any agenda and people could raise the issues they wanted, a lot of people raised the Middle East. The Americans felt a bit on the defensive and so they were not prepared to continue it. When we did further horizon scanning and it became more established, people talked about other issues as well. But it never caught on and it died a death, largely because of the American attitude to it.

Q30 Uma Kumaran: I declare that I used to work with one of the great parts of the United Nations: the climate action team, which does brilliant work. Sir Mark, you have spoken at length today about the role that we can play in international peace and security. Recently, given the global backdrop of multiple conflicts, there have been suggestions that the UN, and particularly the Security Council, is facing a crisis of legitimacy over its response to conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine—obviously, we now have the situation in Iran—and that it has become too polarised for meaningful change to take place in conflict. Is that a fair assertion?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I think that on a lot of issues, that is fair. The Security Council can discuss and debate—there was an emergency session of the UN Security Council yesterday evening on the consequences of the American airstrikes on Iran, but there was no product from it and no outcome. It was just a debate, for obvious reasons. So that is a fair comment in some areas. But, as I say, there are many other conflict areas where the UN Security Council does and still can play a role. There are 11 peacekeeping missions, 11 political missions and so on.

Q31 Uma Kumaran: Thinking of the current conflicts, I read that Brazil said last year that the Council is in paralysis in the face of humanitarian catastrophe, and it is not in the interest of the international community. That was when veto powers were used. You have been talking about veto powers. Only permanent members have the power to veto. Are the current members with veto powers representative of the current global landscape and the power dynamics?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: No, obviously not. They reflect the situation in 1945.

Q32 Uma Kumaran: Thank you for your succinct answers. This is my last question. Article 99 has been used only six times since 1950. We have talked about that, but there is not just that—you have talked at length about the power of diplomacy and the other things that you can do when you come forward.

We have heard powerful words from the UN Secretary-General condemning the actions that are going on currently, whether in Gaza, Iran or Ukraine. What is the point of the UN Security Council if all it can do is tough words, and it cannot force any meaningful change? You talked about



the golden age of 1989 to 2014-15. If we are now looking at 2025 to 2035 for the next golden age, what can we do to stop it just being tough words or warm words?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I think you have to be realistic about that. The cold war lasted 40 years and it was paralysed on a whole range of issues—in fact, many more issues. During the cold war, the Security Council hardly met. It would meet once every two or three weeks, sometimes. Now, there were something like 310 meetings last year, so it is extremely active.

Is it productive? Well, in some areas it is and some areas it is not. If the number of areas where it is not effective expands, people will criticise it. But some solutions that people put forward to that—that you should change the permanent membership and expand the Security Council—will in all likelihood just make the problem worse, because if you extend the veto, you will extend it to countries that have an interest in other parts of the world and will also block progress.

A good example of where the Security Council had a very effective humanitarian response was the Ebola virus. If you recall, in 2014 there was the Ebola virus in west Africa. Galvanised by the UN Secretary-General, the Security Council met, discussed the issue and got resolutions. The UK took on lead responsibility for Sierra Leone, America took on lead responsibility for Liberia and France took on lead responsibility for Guinea. By doing that and mobilising the full international UN system behind those three lead countries, the Security Council very effectively tackled Ebola and stopped it spreading more widely.

That was considered quite radical at the time, because it was a health crisis, rather than a peace and security crisis directly, although of course it could have had peace and security implications. That was a very effective use of the UN Security Council, and very effective co-ordination between the UN Secretary-General and the Security Council. It would still be perfectly capable of doing that today, if there were another crisis like that.

Q33 **Uma Kumaran:** Sorry, Chair; I know I said that was my last question. Sir Mark, do you think that it is actually in situations of war—matters of security—where the Secretary Council does not really work?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: It is in issues of security in which one or more of the permanent members considers itself to have a strong, direct, national interest. That means the United States and the Middle East. It means Russia and Ukraine.

Q34 **Sir John Whittingdale:** On that point, one of the evidence submissions that we received suggested that if the UN became less able to address conflict situations for the reasons that you have given, the work of the UN in humanitarian areas would become more important. Yet, that is now an area where, certainly, the US looks to be massively cutting back on its contribution. I wonder how you see the UN if that cannot be reversed.



Sir Mark Lyall Grant: I worry about the impact on the capacity of the UN system more widely if the reduction in overseas development assistance by a lot of countries continues for a long time. As I say, it will not have any direct impact on the UN Secretary Council because that is funded by direct contributions. It will not necessarily have a direct impact on some bits of the UN system, but I know for a fact—because, again declaring an interest, my son is a lawyer working for UNICEF—that bodies such as UNICEF, the World Food Programme and UNHCR are laying off staff because a lot of their funding came, outside the UN system, from voluntary contributions from member states. If those contributions come down and they are not replaced by other countries stepping up, then, obviously, the effectiveness of the work done by those organisations and agencies will be adversely affected, undoubtedly.

Q35 **Chair:** May I ask one other sweep-up question? To what extent does the Foreign Office deploy regional experts, or multilateral experts, and appropriate linguists to the UN missions in New York and Geneva? In your time there, did you find the resourcing and expertise of those people sufficient?

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: That is a very good question. UKMIS New York is a posting like any other, but is very highly prized, particularly for young, ambitious Foreign Office officers, not only because they feel that they are doing something that can make a difference, but because it has a very flat structure. A lot of the work is done by second secretaries and first secretaries—principals, in civil service terms.

Chair: We saw that. In one of our meetings, we saw quite junior staff taking part.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: They get huge amounts of responsibility. Something that I had not appreciated until I got there is that 90% of negotiation is done by them, at the level of the first secretary and second secretary. Very little is negotiated directly between ambassadors. The exceptions, in my time, were matters such as North Korea, Iran, Libya and Syria.

With those issues, ambassadors got involved at a pretty early stage, but for the vast majority of work on Somalia, Côte d'Ivoire, Yemen and Mali, the negotiations are done at that level. As a result, the younger staff love the work, on the whole, and it attracts some extremely good people. Sometimes they have linguistic skills, and sometimes multilateral experience, but often they are relatively middle management—in their 30s—and do not necessarily have all those skills behind them before they get to New York, but some will.

To be completely frank, one of the reasons we took the pen on some of the Middle East issues at the time was that we had a brilliant desk officer, who could handle the drafting and the massive workload that was required to take the pen. All his colleagues, in the other 14 members of the Security Council, looked to him to take the lead on those issues because he was so good. That is the quality of people we had, and when you do



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not have that, you tend to step back a bit, because someone else will take it on. If there is a brilliant French diplomat who happens to be there at the time, he might step in and do a lot of the negotiating on behalf of the P3.

That is a long answer to the question. Some of those would have regional skills in advance and some would have linguistic skills, but not necessarily. They would, however, all be high quality to come to UKMIS.

Q36 **Chair:** We did see that. We saw the way that the British mission was working particularly with certain partners, where we had responsibility for pen holding, and it was quite clear that a relatively junior member of the team was taking a lead on it. We wondered whether there were people who were charged to go to the UN with specific skills before they went.

Sir Mark Lyall Grant: At that level, probably not, but of course, they would be the people who would then come back at more senior management levels, perhaps at a later stage. But, absolutely, there are good people there.

Chair: Thank you very much for coming. It has been really nice to have your evidence. It has been really helpful. Thank you for being so generous with your time and having a punt at answering all the questions we have thrown at you.