



ANALYSIS

# ESTONIA IN THE UN SECURITY COUNCIL

THE IMPORTANCE AND LIMITS OF EUROPEAN COOPERATION

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## INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In January 2020, Estonia became an elected non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for a two-year term. This major achievement of Estonian diplomacy

*The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the inability of the UNSC to mobilise international cooperation*

came at a time when the international environment is becoming increasingly challenging for multilateral cooperation and a rules-based global order. The UN, a cornerstone of this order, is becoming (again) a major arena of great-power competition. The global spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has underscored such trends and exposed the inability of the UNSC to mobilise international cooperation in order to battle the virus, which had killed over 177,000 people by the second half of April 2020.<sup>2</sup> This serves as a stark example of the weakening of multilateral cooperation in comparison, for example, to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa

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in 2014, which was met with US-led international efforts to tackle the crisis.<sup>3</sup>

While the challenges to multilateralism weaken the ability of the UN to fulfil its core task of promoting international security, there is no doubt that the organisation, and especially the Security Council, remains an active and necessary tool for states to address international conflicts and concerns. Being a member of the UNSC thus provides a unique opportunity for Estonia to strengthen its relations with the most powerful actors in world politics and make its voice heard on resolving conflicts in global hotspots such as Syria, Ukraine and Mali. Estonia's first-ever presidency of the UNSC in May 2020 will allow it to gain further valuable experience as an active stakeholder of the multilateral system.

Under the presidency of Donald Trump, the US has stepped back from many of its international commitments and questioned the usefulness of multilateral cooperation. The position of the US as the global hegemon and leader of the liberal world order has eroded, while major authoritarian powers such as China and Russia

have become more active in promoting their visions of a new international order.<sup>4</sup> The normative consensus of the post-Cold War era (which was always fragile) is now disappearing. In such a changing environment, the EU has

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Sigrid Nuutre for her excellent research assistance.

<sup>2</sup> "COVID-19 Case Tracker," Coronavirus Resource Center, Johns Hopkins University, last accessed 22 April 2020.

<sup>3</sup> Colum Lynch, "U.N. Security Council Paralyzed as Contagion Rages", *Foreign Policy*, 27 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018); Graham Allison, "The New Spheres of Influence," *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020; Sergei Karaganov and Dmitry Suslov, "A new world order: a view from Russia", *Russia in Global Affairs*, 4 October 2018.

become the world's largest and most consistent proponent of rules-based multilateralism.<sup>5</sup> The global backlash against multilateralism has pushed EU member states to cooperate more closely in the UN and the Security Council. However, the EU's lack of unity on many foreign-policy issues is unavoidably visible also in the UN framework.

A rules-based order built on international law and multilateral institutions remains a high priority of Estonia's foreign policy, for good reason.<sup>6</sup> Small states are particularly vulnerable in a world of realist great-power rivalry. They need the protection of international norms and the level playing field provided by multilateral institutions more than large ones. Institutions offer added value to weaker states thanks to the opportunities that they provide to influence stronger partners and adversaries. Defending and reforming the existing multilateral system is thus a particularly strong interest of smaller powers. Cooperation with other like-minded countries from the EU and beyond has to be an essential part of Estonia's activity in this field. In 2020, Estonia is one of four EU countries in the UNSC (the others are Belgium, France and Germany).

This paper explores Estonia's opportunities to contribute to the work of the UNSC and promote its aims as a member of the body, paying particular attention to the possibilities and limits of cooperation among EU member states. It will first provide a brief overview of the EU's position in the UN and then turn to EU cooperation in the UNSC. The third part of the paper explores Estonia's experiences during the first months of its membership, focusing on its contribution to the positions of EU members on

the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP), Ukraine and Syria. The conclusions highlight the difficulty of reconciling a consistent commitment to the EU, multilateralism and international law with a strong transatlantic relationship, which remains vital for Estonia.

*The global backlash against multilateralism has pushed EU member states to cooperate more closely in the UN and the Security Council*

## 1. THE EU AT THE UN

Multilateralism and the notion of a rules-based order have a central place in the EU's vision of the world.<sup>7</sup> It is thus natural for the Union to engage actively with the UN, which is at the core of European efforts to promote an "effective, relevant and resilient multilateral system."<sup>8</sup> The EU as an organisation is not a member of the UN, which remains a state-centric intergovernmental institution, but its representation has gradually strengthened, especially following reforms to its external action introduced by the Lisbon Treaty in 2009.<sup>9</sup> The EU and its member states collectively make the largest financial contribution to the UN system.<sup>10</sup> The EU is fairly united at the UN General Assembly, where coordination within the EU group is generally strong and the coherence of member states' voting is good.<sup>11</sup> After a challenging start under the new treaty, the role of the EU Delegation in coordinating

<sup>5</sup> Richard Gowan and Anthony Dworkin, "[Three crises and an opportunity: Europe's stake in multilateralism](#)", European Council on Foreign Relations, 5 September 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, [Eesti välispoliitika arengukava 2030](#) [Estonian foreign policy development plan 2030] (Tallinn: Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

<sup>7</sup> European Union, [Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy](#), Brussels, June 2016; Nathalie Tocci, [Framing the EU Global Strategy: A Stronger Europe in a Fragile World](#) (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Council of the European Union, "[EU action to strengthen rules-based multilateralism – Council conclusions](#)", 17 June 2019.

<sup>9</sup> Carla Monteleone, "[The United Nations and the European Union](#)", Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics, June 2019.

<sup>10</sup> It accounts for some 30% of the UN's regular budget and 31% of the peacekeeping budget (Monteleone, op. cit.).

<sup>11</sup> Alfonso Medinilla, Pauline Veron and Vera Mazzara, "[EU-UN cooperation: confronting change in the multilateral system](#)", ECDPM Discussion Paper No. 260, September 2019.

positions of the Union and its member states at the UN has strengthened.<sup>12</sup>

There are a number of obstacles to turning the EU's strong presence and financial contribution

*The EU's internal divisions have been visible at the UN, for example, over the Middle East, climate change and migration*

into greater influence. First, internal lack of unity is a long-term weakness that has become more problematic due to increased political fragmentation, the decline of traditional mainstream parties and the rise of populist contenders in many member states.<sup>13</sup> The EU's internal divisions have been visible at the UN, for example, over the Middle East, climate change and migration. Furthermore, on the big and controversial questions on the future of multilateralism, such as reform of the Security Council or how the UN system is financed, there is no common EU position.

Second, transatlantic tensions are having a contradictory effect on EU activity in the UN. The election of Donald Trump as president of the US gave an important push to European cooperation in the UN, as it signalled the withdrawal of the US from its decades-long position as the leader of the liberal world order.<sup>14</sup> Disagreements between the US and Europeans have increased on a number of global issues such as Iran, the MEPP, climate change and migration. At the same time, the issues of transatlantic disagreement overlap with the above-mentioned issues of

intra-European rifts: in some EU member states there are populist parties in power that feel ideologically close to Trump and therefore choose to align with his positions. At the same time, it is in the interest of European states – particularly those that are most dependent on the US as a security ally – to avoid open confrontation. For European transatlanticists such as Estonia, it has become more difficult to bridge transatlantic disagreements and pursue joint Western positions as far as possible.

Third, Russia and China are filling the space left by the more fragmented Europe and more self-centred US. Both Russia and, increasingly, China are challenging Western positions at the UN.<sup>15</sup> These two countries do not call into question the usefulness of the multilateral structure, but they are seeking to redefine its normative content to better reflect their world-view and interests. Both use the UN as an arena for a great-power struggle in which they are focused

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on challenging US hegemony. Both are keen to carve out a privileged position not to be bound by UN norms if these are contrary to their national interests, such as pursuing a dominant role in their regional sphere of influence (e.g. Ukraine and the South China Sea). In the course of the 2010s, the Chinese and Russian positions have converged most visibly on issues pertaining to the conflict in Syria, where Russia

<sup>12</sup> Katie Verlin Laatikainen, "The EU Delegation in New York: A Debut of High Political Drama," in David Spence and Jozef Bátora (eds), *The European External Action Service: European Diplomacy Post-Westphalia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 195–218.

<sup>13</sup> Rosa Balfour et al., *Europe's troublemakers: The populist challenge to foreign policy* (Brussels: European Policy Centre, February 2016).

<sup>14</sup> G. John Ikenberry, "[The Plot Against American Foreign Policy](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2017.

<sup>15</sup> See, for example, Angela Stent, "[Russia and China: Axis of revisionists?](#)", Brookings, February 2020; Kristine Lee, "[Coming Soon to the United Nations: Chinese Leadership and Authoritarian Values](#)", *Foreign Affairs*, 16 September 2019.

continues its military operation.<sup>16</sup> The US has recently adjusted its approach to the UN and seems to be focused on countering the rising influence of China.<sup>17</sup>

In this global context, closer cooperation at the UN has become an important priority for France and Germany, which has been noticeable during Germany's term as a non-permanent member of the UNSC in 2019–20. The two countries undertook a symbolic action highlighting European unity through a twin presidency of the UNSC in March and April 2019. Furthermore, France and Germany launched a new "alliance for multilateralism", which is an informal grouping of like-minded countries from across the world (including Estonia). The purpose of this initiative was to express support for the multilateral system,

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which, according to the German and French foreign ministers, was "experiencing its perhaps gravest crisis since its emergence after the Second World War", as some actors were "increasingly engaging in power politics".<sup>18</sup> In order to highlight that the EU also had non-Western partners that wish to support multilateral cooperation, the co-hosts of the first ministerial meeting, held in the margins of UNGA in September 2019, included Canada, Chile, Ghana, Mexico and Singapore.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>16</sup> China Power Team, "[Is China contributing to the United Nations' mission?](#)," *China Power*, 7 March 2016 (updated 24 January 2020).

<sup>17</sup> Colin Lynch, "[U.S. State Department Appoints Envoy to Counter Chinese Influence at the U.N.](#)," *Foreign Policy*, 22 January 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Heiko Maas and Jean-Yves Le Drian, "[Who, if not us?](#)," German Federal Foreign Office, in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 14 February 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Alliance for Multilateralism, "[Ministerial Meeting: Building the Network and Presenting Results](#)," 26 September 2019.

## 2. EU MEMBER STATES IN THE UNSC

In recent years, EU cooperation has also increased in the UNSC, although the state-centric nature of the UN system is particularly strongly enshrined in this most authoritative multilateral body. A collective EU seat on the UNSC has been discussed since the 1990s but remains unrealistic. Before the era of Trump and Brexit, the two permanent EU members of the Council – France and the UK – cooperated closely with the US, constituting an influential "P3" group of Western powers. The Trump presidency, together with the increase in great-power rivalry, was a major factor that pushed France and the UK to pay greater attention to European cooperation in the UNSC. Now that

France has become the only permanent UNSC member from the EU, it has a unique role in coordinating and ensuring continuity of EU representation.

The Lisbon Treaty introduced ambitious aims to increase European coordination in multilateral fora, but the UNSC constituted an exception, reflecting the wish of permanent members to shield their privileged position and keep the Council as a domain of state sovereignty that is affected by European integration only to a very limited degree. Hence, EU members of the UNSC are not obliged by the treaty to formally coordinate in this framework. However, they are obliged to defend agreed EU positions in the Council (when these exist) and keep other member states informed about the discussions behind closed doors:

*...Member States which are also members of the United Nations Security Council will concert and keep the other Member States and the High Representative fully informed. Member States which are members of the Security Council will, in the execution of their functions, defend the positions and the interests of the Union, without prejudice to their responsibilities under the provisions of the United Nations Charter. (Treaty on European Union, Article 34.2)*

In accordance with this obligation, EU members take turns in operating as “briefer of the month”. Estonia undertook this task for the first time in February. For elected members of UNSC, this is a good opportunity to strengthen the country’s weight as a partner in the EU.

The work of the UNSC is focused on discussing and searching for solutions to the most serious international conflicts. The most visible concrete indication of European cooperation in the Council are joint stakeouts by EU members,<sup>20</sup> the number of which has multiplied since 2017.<sup>21</sup> Sweden, a non-permanent

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member in 2017–18, was active in generating a series of joint European stakeouts on issues such as the conflicts in Syria and Ukraine.<sup>22</sup> The Netherlands also pursued European cooperation as a key priority of its UNSC membership in 2018 and consolidated the practice of joint stakeouts.<sup>23</sup> The pro-European

<sup>20</sup> Including outgoing or incoming members, e.g. Poland as an outgoing member during the first half of 2020.

<sup>21</sup> Hugo Nunes da Silva, “[United in Adversity? The Europeanisation of EU Concertation Practices in a More Divided UN Security Council](#),” EU Diplomacy Paper 2/2019, College of Europe.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Gowan, “[How not to save the world: EU divisions at the UN](#),” European Council on Foreign Relations, 22 January 2019.

<sup>23</sup> Italy and the Netherlands received the same number of votes in the election of UNSC members for 2017–18 and agreed to split their term.

Membership	Countries
Permanent members	China, France,* Russia, UK, USA
Non-permanent members 2020-21	Estonia, Niger, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, Tunisia, Vietnam
Non-permanent members 2019-2020	Belgium, Germany, Dominican Republic, Indonesia, South Africa
Non-permanent members 2018-19	Côte d’Ivoire, Equatorial Guinea, Kuwait, Peru, Poland
Non-permanent members 2017-18	Ethiopia, Kazakhstan, Bolivia, Italy (2017 only), Netherlands (2018 only), Sweden
Non-permanent members 2016-17	Egypt, Senegal, Japan, Uruguay, Ukraine
Non-permanent members 2015-16	Angola, Malaysia, Venezuela, New Zealand, Spain
Non-permanent members 2014-15	Chad, Nigeria, Jordan, Chile, Lithuania
Non-permanent members 2013-14	Rwanda, South Korea, Argentina, Australia, Luxembourg
Non-permanent members 2012-13	Morocco, Togo, Pakistan, Guatemala, Azerbaijan
Non-permanent members 2011-12	South Africa, India, Colombia, Germany, Portugal
Non-permanent members 2010-11	Gabon, Nigeria, Lebanon, Brazil, Bosnia & Herzegovina

\* EU member states are marked in blue

**Table 1. UNSC permanent and non-permanent members, 2010–21.**

approach was carried on by Poland, in spite of the strong transatlantic focus and rather Eurosceptic views of the Polish government, and Belgium in subsequent years. Closer European cooperation became particularly important for the elected members, while the permanent members appear to have remained somewhat more lukewarm about sharing information and initiating joint stakeouts.<sup>24</sup>

In general, it has become a widely appreciated practice among member states that EU members aim to express their joint position in the UNSC whenever possible, and on matters where their views differ preferably formulate a weaker compromise position rather than making no joint stakeout at all. Joint positions in the UNSC framework have become a channel for the EU to signal to the international community its unity and collective aims.

### 3. ESTONIA'S EARLY EXPERIENCES

During the first few months of Estonia's membership of the UNSC, the country joined statements by EU members on a range of

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issues. EU cooperation and coordination was very active, with probably a record number of six joint stakeouts issued in February concerning Myanmar, the MEPP, Libya, Ukraine and (twice) Syria. Reaching consensus among EU members was not always straightforward, as shown by the examples below. Estonia took an active role as an EU member state, twice taking the initiative to make a joint stakeout, on Ukraine and Idlib/Syria.

The most complicated case for Estonia was, however, the issue of the MEPP. During the Trump presidency, this has become one of the most contentious issues between the US and Europeans.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, the EU's

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position has not been united.<sup>26</sup> The peace proposal regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict made by the US on 28 January 2020 provoked sharp criticism from many directions, for example an open letter by 50 former foreign ministers and leaders from across Europe.<sup>27</sup> Yet disagreements within the EU remained. The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell, issued a critical statement saying that the US proposal departed from "internationally agreed parameters."<sup>28</sup> Estonia adopted a more forthcoming position, welcoming the US initiative as a "chance to reinvigorate the Middle East Peace Process and achieve a lasting peace between Israel and Palestine."<sup>29</sup> EU members in the UNSC reached a compromise position that is largely based on Borrell's statement but, at the initiative of Estonia, takes a softer tone on the US proposal and highlights the commitment of the signatories to the transatlantic partnership.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Luigi Scazzieri, "[A troubled partnership: the US and Europe in the Middle East](#)," Centre for European Reform, 10 July 2019.

<sup>26</sup> For example, the US decision to move its embassy to Jerusalem was widely criticised in the EU, but welcomed by the Czech Republic, Hungary and Romania.

<sup>27</sup> European Council on Foreign Relations, "[Open letter: Grave concern about US plan for Israeli-Palestinian conflict](#)," 1 March 2020.

<sup>28</sup> European External Action Service, "[MEPP: Statement by the High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell on the US initiative](#)," 4 February 2020.

<sup>29</sup> Estonian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "[Estonia supports the Middle East Peace Process](#)," 31 January 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, "[Joint EU stakeout on Middle East Peace Process at the Security Council](#)," 11 February 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Nunes da Silva, op.cit., p. 19.

This issue illustrates the concern often mentioned in the Estonian public debate that UNSC membership would expose the country on issues where the US and Europeans disagree and force it to choose sides – which it in principle avoids doing whenever possible, due to the importance of transatlantic unity for Estonia. Arguably this concern has been exaggerated: there have always been some disagreements between the US and Europeans, and there is generally an understanding in Washington that, in various international fora, EU member states follow the positions they have adopted within the EU. Differences

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between Europeans and the US at the UN do not usually have a direct impact on NATO or bilateral relations between the US and its European allies.

Yet in the era of Donald Trump, Washington's behaviour has become more erratic and unpredictable, while his overall position towards the EU is unprecedentedly hostile. This shift, combined with a more selfish US approach to international commitments, has indeed made it increasingly difficult for Estonia and other European allies to reconcile good transatlantic relations with a consistent commitment to the EU, multilateralism and international law.

In essence, the main problem with Trump's peace proposal for the Middle East is that it goes against relevant UN resolutions and principles of international law. Estonia, like other allies of the US, is thus facing the question whether to risk losing its credibility to insist on respect for international law in other

instances, e.g. the conflicts in Ukraine and Georgia, if it supports the violation of the same norms in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two key priorities of Estonian foreign policy – alliance with the US and commitment to international law – are on a collision course. Estonia's choice thus far has been to align with international law and decisions taken in the EU, while trying to cushion the transatlantic disagreements.

This brings us to the case of Ukraine, which was discussed in the UNSC on 18 February at Russia's request. Moscow wished to use this occasion to propagate its perspective on the conflict in Ukraine, notably blaming the latter for the lack of implementation of the Minsk agreements.<sup>31</sup> Estonia took the initiative to issue a joint position by EU members of the UNSC, highlighting that the conflict in Ukraine was a clear case of Russia violating the fundamental principles of international law.<sup>32</sup> In the drafting process, Estonia pushed for stronger language to make clear the responsibility of Russia, which was reflected in the final version.

This was a significant achievement, not least against the backdrop of ongoing discussions in the EU regarding the French proposal to re-engage with Russia and pursue renewed cooperation in the hope of improving Europe's

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security situation.<sup>33</sup> In these European discussions, France maintained the position that settlement of the Ukraine conflict was a precondition for such re-engagement, but left

<sup>31</sup> What's in Blue, "[Ukraine meeting](#)," 17 February 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, "[Stakeout on Ukraine by Estonia, Belgium, France, Germany and Poland](#)," 18 February 2020.

<sup>33</sup> French Embassy in London, "[Special envoy explains French approach to Russia](#)," 19 February 2020.

its partners wondering whether it was willing to make concessions to Russia in order to normalise the relationship and pursue cooperation, which it considered necessary in part due to the transatlantic rift. In the UNSC discussion with international officials and a representative of Ukraine, France (unlike Estonia, Germany and the UK) avoided pointing the finger on Russia's violations of the Minsk agreement.<sup>34</sup> Estonia's activity in the UNSC re-confirmed the EU's commitment to the

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independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Ukraine, which is of huge importance for Estonian security interests.

Estonia also took the initiative on an EU stakeout on Syria/Idlib following military escalation by the Syrian regime, assisted by Russia, that enabled president Assad's forces to regain territory in Idlib at the cost of extensive civilian casualties and displacements.

With Russia and China continuing to back the Syrian regime, Estonia was part of a demarche by nine UNSC members to Secretary-General António Guterres urging a halt to the violence.<sup>35</sup>

The Syrian move entailed attacks against Turkish forces operating in Idlib, causing the death of 33 Turkish soldiers. The EU stakeout at the UN condemned the attacks and expressed solidarity with Turkey. It was not possible to reach similar statements in the EU or NATO. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate on the controversial role of Turkey in the Syrian conflict, Estonia made a successful

move to mobilise at least partial EU support for a NATO ally in the framework of the UNSC.

Of course, Estonia's cooperation with like-minded countries in the UNSC goes beyond the EU. For example, Estonia, together with the UK and the US, raised cyber-attacks for the first time as a separate issue in the UNSC and issued a joint stakeout condemning a large-scale cyber-attack conducted by Russia's military intelligence service against the Georgian government and media websites in October 2019.<sup>36</sup> Cybersecurity in general is a flagship issue for Estonia in international fora, now including the UNSC.

The need to engage other partners beyond the EU group has grown due to Brexit. In future, France will at times be the only EU member of the UNSC, possibly as soon as 2022. The UK's absence since 1 February has obviously weakened the EU's voice. Estonia lost a like-minded partner in the EU whose views on issues such as the Ukraine conflict are closer to Estonia than those of many other EU members. As a symbolic

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gesture (but not due to a substantial change of positions), the UK did not wish to join any of the EU stakeouts in February. As a positive sign regarding future cooperation, the UK did join an EU joint stakeout on North Korea on 5 March.<sup>37</sup>

In the course of March, the work of the UNSC was increasingly overshadowed by the global spread of COVID-19. Estonia took the initiative in drafting a Security Council statement that called for greater international cooperation in tackling the pandemic, which "may constitute a

<sup>34</sup> United Nations, "[Upcoming Period Will Be Crucial to Resolution of Conflict in Ukraine, International Officials Tell Security Council](#)," 18 February 2020.

<sup>35</sup> "[Idlib Siege Prompts UN Security Council Members to Urge Action](#)," Bloomberg, 26 February 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, "[Stakeout on cyber-attack against Georgia by Estonia, the United Kingdom and the United States](#)," 5 March 2020.

<sup>37</sup> Permanent Mission of Estonia to the UN, "[Stakeout on the DPRK by Estonia, Belgium, France, Germany and the UK](#)," 5 March 2020.

threat to international peace and security". The initiative was blocked by South Africa and China.<sup>38</sup> As the virus was spreading across the world, China was making every effort to deny

*With China focused on saving face and the US focused on countering China rather than countering the virus, much-needed global cooperation in addressing the crisis fell victim to great-power confrontation*

its responsibility for the outbreak of the pandemic, including via a massive disinformation campaign.<sup>39</sup> At the same time, the US focused its international engagement on insisting that COVID-19 should be referred to as the "Wuhan virus", which made it impossible to agree any joint statements involving China. With China focused on saving face and the US focused on countering China rather than countering the virus, much-needed global cooperation in addressing the crisis fell victim to great-power confrontation. This gave rise to calls for the EU to take the lead in enhancing global cooperation in tackling the pandemic.<sup>40</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Even before the outbreak of COVID-19, the international context of Estonia's term on the UNSC was going to be tense and difficult to

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navigate. Being a non-permanent member of the Security Council has imposed on Estonia the obligation to position itself on the most serious

<sup>38</sup> Lynch, op.cit.

<sup>39</sup> "From cover-up to global donor: China's soft power play," *Financial Times*, 24 March 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Ian Bond, "The COVID-19 pandemic: The EU must think and act globally," Centre for European Reform, 27 March 2020.

international conflicts, sometimes making hard choices unavoidable. At the same time, the first months of membership have already shown Estonia's ability to make use of the opportunities that this position creates for being an active member of the diplomatic community, making one's voice heard and promoting national interests, including the fundamental interest of small states to defend multilateral cooperation and a rules-based order.

Estonia's early experience confirms that European cooperation is an important avenue

*With or without Security Council membership, it has become more difficult to reconcile good transatlantic relations with a consistent commitment to the EU, multilateralism and international law*

for EU members (especially elected members) to mobilise wider support and gain visibility for their positions. European cooperation has become increasingly important due to great-power rivalry and disagreements that prevent the UNSC from taking collective decisions on the above-mentioned conflicts. Estonia was proactive and made a real difference to the joint stakeouts of EU members in the three cases described above (the MEPP, Ukraine and Syria/Idlib), proving that a small state can make its views heard in the UNSC alongside the most powerful global actors.

As was to be expected, Estonia has already gained first-hand experience of how transatlantic tensions play out in the UNSC. With or without Security Council membership, it has become more difficult to reconcile good transatlantic relations with a consistent commitment to the EU, multilateralism and international law. The case of the MEPP, as discussed above, illustrates

how these key priorities can clash with each other. In spite of the transatlantic tensions, it is in Estonia's interest to work towards consensus between Europe and the US as far as possible and, on issues where this is not feasible, avoid highlighting or exacerbating the tensions.

At the same time, Estonia has a strong interest in being consistent on international law, even if at times this means disagreeing with its most important security ally. The harsh truth in the world of realist power politics – which is increasingly the name of the game – is that, in the face of a serious threat to its security, a small state can be saved by a powerful ally rather than by noble principles of international law. However, international law and multilateral cooperation remain key instruments for the international community to promote peace and prevent and resolve conflicts. The dilemma for Estonia and others is how to work to maintain the rules-based order while simultaneously adapting to its erosion and change.

European states need a stronger EU in order to cope with this balancing act. In recent years, the Union has made progress in developing a more active role and unified presence in the UN, including the Security Council. Even more importantly, it has taken steps to strengthen its ability to take care of European security. Now the challenge is to move on from joint statements to more action and real ability to enforce international law and resolve conflicts, especially in the EU's own neighbourhood. The need for Europe's active role in tackling global problems has also been evident during the COVID-19 crisis.

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