



ANALYSIS

ESTONIA IN THE SECURITY COUNCIL A HISTORY IN THREE CRISES

| RICHARD GOWAN |

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Cover page photo: Taliban fighters atop a Humvee vehicle take part in a rally in Kabul on August 31, 2021. Photo by Hoshang Hashimi / AFP/Scanpix

Police detain a protestor during an opposition rally to protest the official presidential election results in Minsk, Belarus, Sunday, Nov. 8, 2020. AP Photo/Scanpix

Symbolic picture of US exit from the JCPOA joint plan by President Donald Trump and its implications for the EU. Scanpix

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over Belarus, Estonia was a prominent player in UN debates. On others, such as Ethiopia, it adopted a lower profile. Yet by the end of 2021, Estonia's diplomats were no strangers to multilateral crisis management.

In some cases, as over Belarus, Estonia was a prominent player in UN debates. On others, such as Ethiopia, it adopted a lower profile

INTRODUCTION

When a journalist asked British Prime Minister Harold Macmillan what worried him most in politics, he famously replied: “Events, dear boy, events.” Diplomats who have served in the United Nations Security Council know all about the power of events – unforeseen crises and geopolitical flare-ups – to upset their plans. Elected members of the Council often begin their two-year terms with carefully-crafted and well-publicised plans for debates on big global topics. Without exception, they admit that the day-to-day rush of responding to conflicts, coups and terrorist attacks takes them by surprise in the first months of their tenure. Council members gain respect from their peers for their ability to stay cool under pressure.

There was no shortage of disruptive events during Estonia's time on the Council in 2020 and 2021. The Estonian team in New York began work with a modest but substantial agenda, with a focus on bringing cybersecurity on the Council's agenda.¹ Yet in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought in-person Council meetings to a halt and sparked a fierce row between US and Chinese diplomats in New York over the origins of the disease.² In the two years that followed, Council members argued over issues ranging from the Trump administration's drive to undermine the Iranian nuclear deal to the electoral crisis in Belarus, the war in Ethiopia and the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan. In some cases, as

This paper tells the story of Estonia's Council term through the lens of three crises: (1) the 2020 Iranian sanctions “snapback” debate, which saw the Trump administration almost completely isolated in the Council over its call to restore previous sanctions resolutions against Tehran; (2) the Council's muted response to the deterioration of security in Eastern Europe through 2020 and 2021, beginning with the post-electoral protests in Belarus; and (3) the UN's response to the Afghan collapse in the second half of 2021. Estonia played notable but different roles in all three cases. During the Iranian sanctions debates, Tallinn had to make hard choices between supporting its US and European allies in a row that American officials warned could do lasting damage to the Council's international standing. Facing the crisis in Belarus, Estonia had the uphill task of persuading non-European members of the Council to care about elections in a country they knew little about. After the fall of Kabul, Estonia and Norway had to facilitate UN diplomacy over a crisis that caught UN members off guard.

This paper focuses on the Afghanistan, Belarus and Iran crises because each symbolised broader shifts in geopolitics with troubling implications for the future of UN diplomacy

These were by no means the only crises that Estonia engaged with – significantly or tangentially – during its Council term. The chair of the Council's committee also dealt with sanctions on Sudan, where a coup took place in October 2021. However, this paper focuses on the Afghanistan, Belarus and Iran crises because each symbolised broader shifts in geopolitics with troubling implications for the future of UN diplomacy. The Trump administration's push to restore a past UN sanctions resolution on Iran marked the culmination of its broader

¹ These goals and plans are well described in Kristen Haugevik, Piret Kuusik, Kristi Raik and Niels Nagelus Schia, *Small States, Different Approaches: Estonia and Norway on the UN Security Council* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, November 2021).

² Estonia was the first Council member to suggest a Council product on COVID-19 in March 2020, but Tunisia and France led most diplomacy on this file. See Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, “[Salvaging the Security Council's Coronavirus Response](#),” International Crisis Group, 4 August 2020.

attack on multilateral agreements – such as the Paris climate change deal – and threatened to exacerbate conflict in the Middle East. The Council’s debates over Belarus were symptomatic of worsening relations between Russia and the West over the European security order, which would culminate in Moscow’s war on Ukraine in 2022. The US decision to accept the Taliban takeover of Kabul signalled the Biden administration’s willingness to step back from costly and long-running foreign interventions, raising questions about Washington’s position on the world stage. For many commentators, all these episodes – coupled with growing Sino-American tensions – signified the final fracturing of the post-1989 international order. Whether or not these gloomy analyses prove to be correct, it is certainly true that – as I have argued elsewhere – the Council’s limitations as a channel for crisis diplomacy in an era of geopolitical uncertainty became increasingly clear during Estonia’s membership.³

2020 was not, therefore, a period in which Estonia (or any other actor) was well-positioned to achieve dramatic diplomatic successes in the Security Council. It often had to settle for scoring small wins – such as focusing UN attention on Belarus through informal Council meetings – against significant opposition from some other Council members.

This litany of crises did not derail Estonia’s initial plans for its Council term, including persuading the body to focus on cybersecurity for the first time

It is also worth noting that (as we will highlight at the end of this essay) this litany of crises did not derail Estonia’s initial plans for its Council term, including persuading the body to focus on cybersecurity for the first time. If Estonia faced some serious storms at the UN, it navigated them adroitly and calmly.

1. THE IRAN “SNAPBACK” DEBATE

From the outset of their term on the Council, Estonian officials worried that they might face a crisis over the Middle East that would divide their US and European allies.⁴ Policy-makers in Tallinn did not relish the prospect of choosing sides between Washington and its EU partners. Critics of Estonia’s decision to run for a Council seat warned that it could do unnecessary damage to its relations with its main security partner, the US, for little gain at the UN.⁵ The specific dangers of US tensions with Iran spiralling out of control came into focus during Estonia’s first week as a Council member,

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when an American drone killed Iranian general Qassim Soleimani in Iraq. Although the Council did not react publicly to this event, it was clear that Iranian-American tensions would resurface in the course of 2020.

As early as January 2020 (and by some accounts even earlier), Security Council members were predicting a crisis involving the Trump administration over UN sanctions against Tehran. In endorsing the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA), the Council had agreed that previous UN sanctions on Iran would gradually end over the following decade. These “sunsets” included the October 2020 end of the UN embargo on the sale and purchase of conventional weapons by the Iranians. Having formally quit the JCPOA in 2018, however, the Trump administration insisted that the embargo should stay in place. Through the first half of 2020, the European signatories of the agreement – Britain, France and Germany – looked to see if some

⁴ Author’s conversations, Tallinn, December 2019.

⁵ See Kristi Raik, *Estonia in the Security Council: The Importance and Limits of European Cooperation* (Tallinn: International Centre for Defence and Security, Estonian Foreign Policy Institute, April 2020), 7.

³ Richard Gowan, “[Learning to Live With a Limited Security Council](#),” International Crisis Group, 29 July 2021.

compromise on the embargo was feasible. But it was clear that neither Tehran nor Washington was willing to compromise on this question.

By the middle of the year, therefore, the Trump administration was gearing up to push for the Security Council to pass a new stand-alone arms embargo against the Iranians. It argued that if the Council did not cooperate, it would activate a process called “snapback”, by which any of the parties to the 2015 deal could resurrect past UN sanctions resolutions on Iran that had been terminated as part of the JCPOA.⁶

The Trump administration identified Estonia as the one European member of the Council that might support its stance, to avoid damaging relations with its closest ally

This would include the conventional arms embargo. Yet this threat raised knotty legal questions about whether the US, having exited the JCPOA, still had the standing to initiate snapback at all. UN diplomats, officials and lawyers spent many hours reading and re-reading the text of the relevant UN resolution (UNSCR 2231) and hunting down obscure precedents from the Council’s history on this issue.

This process became increasingly uncomfortable for Estonia.⁷ France, the UK and Germany (an elected Council member in 2019–20) all signalled opposition to the US approach, fearing that it would ultimately lead to the collapse of the JCPOA. The Trump administration identified Estonia as the one European member of the Council that might support its stance, to avoid damaging relations with its closest ally. As diplomacy around the arms embargo gathered pace, Brian Hook – the senior State Department point person working on Iran – visited Estonia to discuss the matter.⁸ While we do not know exactly what Hook said to his counterparts in Tallinn, there were rumours in New York that the US could persuade Estonia and/or Tunisia (also

facing US lobbying) to introduce a resolution calling for a new arms embargo.

This was precisely the type of rift between Washington and the EU that Estonia had hoped to avoid at the UN, and that domestic critics of the Council seat had warned could harm the country’s security ties. Complicating matters further, Estonia had pledged to be a defender of international law during its Security Council campaign, but the snapback debate involved genuinely complex discussions about the legal interpretation of the body’s resolutions, which

Tallinn had no authority to resolve.⁹

The Trump administration tried to stoke panic in private and public about the fallout of the Council’s failure to renew the arms embargo on Iran. US Ambassador Kelly Craft warned that China and Russia would “revel in this

Council’s dysfunction and failure”.¹⁰ Estonia was in the middle of a worsening diplomatic debacle.

Nonetheless, the Estonians held their ground and refused to be sucked into arguments that could only hurt them. With firm backing from the E3, both Estonia and Tunisia refused to introduce a new arms embargo resolution.

When the US then tried to initiate snapback, Tallinn joined its European allies in rejecting the Americans’ claim to have the right to do so

When the US proposed a resolution in its own right, they joined the majority of Council members in abstaining on the issue. And when the US then tried to initiate snapback, Tallinn joined its European allies – and all but one of the 14 other Council members – in rejecting the Americans’ claim to have the right to do so.¹¹ The US effort to enact snapback hobbled on until the end of the Trump administration (with Washington claiming that it had in fact succeeded in doing so), but Ambassador Craft and other US officials quietly dropped their previous dire warnings of a Council breakdown. The snapback issue went from being a crisis to an afterthought at the UN in a matter of weeks.

⁶ For the technical details of snapback, see International Crisis Group, *Iran: The US Brings Maximum Pressure to the UN*, Middle East Report no. 218 (Brussels: International Crisis Group, 19 August 2020).

⁷ The following paragraphs draw on the author’s notes and emails on the file from 2020.

⁸ Michael Lipin, “US Tries to Extend UN Arms Embargo on Iran Despite Obstacles,” *Voice of America*, 30 July 2020.

⁹ See International Crisis Group, *Iran*, 15-18.

¹⁰ Katrina Manson and Michael Peel, “Iran Sanctions Dispute Poses New Challenge for the UN,” *Financial Times*, 1 September 2020.

¹¹ The exception was the Dominican Republic.

Perhaps because it fizzled out so unspectacularly, there have been few commentaries on Estonia's role in the Iran saga. Yet, by refusing to give even token support to the US arms embargo drive, Estonia played a small part in pushing back against US efforts to undermine the Iranian nuclear deal completely. The fact that the other European members of the Council were united in opposing the US on this problem certainly gave Tallinn some political cover. But it does appear that Washington underestimated Estonia's willingness to resist concerted US lobbying. The fact that the Trump administration was fairly clearly heading for electoral defeat in late 2020 made it easier to demur. But Estonia had faced its greatest fear in the Security Council – a transatlantic rift over the Middle East – and came out largely unscathed.

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2. SHINING A SPOTLIGHT ON BELARUS AND CRIMEA

While the snapback mess put Estonia temporarily on the same side as Russia in a UN debate, it was locked in a dispute with Moscow over events in Belarus in mid-2020. If Tallinn fretted about offending the US in the Security Council, it was bound to disagree with Russia on issues including Ukraine and Syria.¹² Less foreseeable was the crisis in Belarus that escalated in August 2020, as huge crowds took to the streets to protest President Alexander Lukashenko's claim to have won a landslide victory in national elections, and state forces cracked down forcefully against civilians. This episode presented Estonia with two major problems at the UN. The first was that Russia, Lukashenko's ally, would inevitably veto any Council statement or resolution on the crisis. The second was that some non-Western Council members questioned whether the protests – ostensibly an internal political affair – warranted the Council's attention as a threat to international peace and security. Even some

¹² See Raik, *Estonia in the Security Council*, 8.

other European members of the Council, notably including France and Germany, seem to have signalled some discomfort with challenging Russia at the UN on Belarus,

Even some other European members of the Council, notably including France and Germany, seem to have signalled some discomfort with challenging Russia at the UN on Belarus

rather than working through bodies like the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

Nonetheless, as the Council's sole Eastern European member, Estonia could hardly ignore the events in Belarus. Rather than make a futile push for formal Council action on the situation, the Estonian mission in New York chose to organise two informal "Arria formula meetings" in September 2020 and January 2021, involving speakers from Belarusian civil society and opposition parties, with then Foreign Minister Urmas Reinsalu in the chair.¹³ The second event featured Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, the opposition presidential candidate that many observers believed had won the election. While these events had no formal standing, they at least contributed to efforts to maintain international public attention on the crisis. As Ashish Pradhan and I have argued, the Council is sometimes only useful as a "platform for public diplomacy" over crises where its divisions preclude serious UN engagement.¹⁴ Estonia used it effectively in this fashion (it also requested a number of closed-door sessions on the crisis, including the migrant situation on the Belarusian-Polish border).¹⁵ Nonetheless, some non-Western Council members continued to cast doubt on whether the Council should engage on Belarus, especially after the number of protests declined in late 2020.¹⁶

¹³ See "[Arria-formula Meeting on Media Freedom in Belarus](#)," Security Council Report, 21 January 2021.

¹⁴ Richard Gowan and Ashish Pradhan, "[Why the UN Stumbles in Responding to Coups](#)," International Crisis Group, 24 January 2022.

¹⁵ "[Belarus: Meeting Under 'Any Other Business' on the Migration Crisis](#)," Security Council Report, 11 November 2021.

¹⁶ Author's private conversation, January 2021.

Estonia also convened two Arria formula meetings on the human rights situation in Crimea during its term. The Russian mission to the UN seems to have noted these efforts and wanted to emulate them. In 2021, Russia organised three Arria formula meetings of its own on Ukraine – variously promoting its version of the situation in Crimea and the events of the 2014 Maidan revolution – and in December it arranged a fourth event on the treatment of minorities in the Black Sea and Baltic regions.¹⁷ While Russia used this as a further opportunity to criticise Ukrainian policies, it also used this occasion to accuse Estonia of pursuing “devastating” policies aimed at limiting education for Russian-speaking children.¹⁸ Although most diplomats dismissed this event as a stunt, Russia seems to have imitated – and aimed to counter – the way Estonia and other Council members used Arria formula meetings to shape political narratives about crises like those in Belarus and Ukraine. In its own way, this may have been a tribute to Estonia’s efforts, as it suggests that Russia does not want to let its critics dominate the narrative at the

(diplomatic coordinators) on Afghanistan alongside Norway. The Estonian team only took on this role at the start of 2021, as a sign of growing confidence after their first year on the Council. Even at that point, it was clear that the UN would likely play a larger role in Afghan affairs as the US reduced its military footprint in the country. The Estonian mission looked for expert advice on likely scenarios – including rapid Taliban gains – in the summer, but the collapse of the Kabul government still shocked all Council members.

During the immediate crisis surrounding the fall of Kabul, Estonia and Norway quickly discovered the limits of their room for manoeuvre during a crisis involving direct US interests

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UN (the Russians, of course, have continued to spread their distorted narratives about the situation in Ukraine at the UN during the war this year).

3. THE AFGHAN COLLAPSE

Estonia found itself at the centre of Council diplomacy over the Afghanistan crisis in August 2021, as one of the two “penholders”

During the immediate crisis surrounding the fall of Kabul, Estonia and Norway quickly discovered the limits of their room for manoeuvre during a crisis involving direct US interests. Prior to the capture of the Afghan capital, the two penholders introduced a Council statement expressing alarm at the level of violence and human rights abuses, and threatening the Taliban with unspecified “additional measures” in response to “actions that threaten the peace, security or stability of Afghanistan”.¹⁹ The US, then in direct negotiations with the Taliban on the withdrawal process, blocked this initiative stone dead. Washington would not back a Security Council resolution until the very end of August, as the withdrawal wound up. US officials insisted on leading the drafting process on this text, which laid out general expectations for the Taliban’s behaviour, requiring tricky negotiations with China and Russia.

Having defied the Trump administration over Iran, Estonian diplomats thus found themselves having to follow the Biden administration’s lead on Afghanistan. The Council moved tentatively on Afghan-related issues through much of the second half of 2021. In September, it extended the mandate of the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), without substantive

¹⁷ “Arria-formula Meeting on Minorities in the Baltic and Black Sea Regions,” Security Council Report, 21 December 2021.

¹⁸ Dmitry Polyanskiy, “Statement by First Deputy Permanent Representative Dmitry Polyanskiy at UNSC Arria Formula Meeting on the Situation with National Minorities and Glorification of Nazism in Baltic and Black Sea Regions,” Permanent Mission of the Russian Federation to the United Nations, 22 December 2021.

¹⁹ Text on file with the author, received 13 August 2021.

alterations, to March 2022. In December, after further difficult negotiations, the US pushed through a resolution confirming sanctions exemptions on humanitarian assistance to Afghan recipients. While Norway and Estonia facilitated these processes – and had to see off efforts by China and Russia to cut back UNAMA’s political and human rights mandates – the US remained the decisive actor in UN diplomacy on this file. Having taken a stand over snapback and driven Council discussions on Belarus, Estonia found itself contending – through no fault of its own – with the limitations of being an elected member.

CONCLUSION

All elected members leave the Security Council with unfinished business. Estonian diplomats who worked on Afghanistan, Eastern Europe and Iran know that the diplomatic processes that they contributed to in 2020–21 remain incomplete. At the time of writing in February 2022, the Security Council is still discussing what to do with UNAMA. While there have been no Council talks on Belarus to date this year, there have been a flood of meetings on Ukraine. The Biden administration and its European allies have meanwhile dangled the threat of a new and more credible “snapback” of UN sanctions against Iran if talks in Vienna on revitalising the JCPOA fail to reach a successful outcome.

In its use of Arria formula meetings and public diplomacy on Belarus and Crimea, Estonia made intelligent use of the limited options available to it to address tensions with Russia through the UN

Because most conflicts and crises extend beyond the term of an elected member – and as we have noted, there are few openings for truly decisive diplomatic successes in the Council these days – it can be hard to assess a member’s performance. Nonetheless, this review of Estonia’s handling of the Afghanistan, Belarus and Iran crises does lead to some working conclusions. The first is that Tallinn and the Estonian mission in New York showed sound judgement when necessary – especially over snapback – in a way that

avoided alienating any of the country’s major international partners. Those who worried that a term on the Council would actually harm Estonia’s interests were proved wrong. Second, in its use of Arria formula meetings and public diplomacy on Belarus and Crimea, Estonia made intelligent use of the limited options available to it to address tensions with Russia through the UN. Lastly, Estonia appears to have enjoyed a reasonable degree of trust among other Council members, especially after its first year in the body. The elected and permanent members would not have agreed to let Estonia “hold the pen” on Afghanistan if they had doubted its capabilities.

It is also worth highlighting that, in parallel, Estonia made progress – and indeed greater advances than initially seemed possible – in bringing cybersecurity on the Council’s agenda in parallel with all the crisis diplomacy described here.²⁰ In the space of two years, and despite scepticism from some of the permanent Council members, Estonia went from organising an Arria formula meeting on the topic in May 2020 to presiding over the body’s first formal meeting on cyber issues in June 2021. Estonia had hoped to go further and secure a formal Presidential Statement on cybersecurity, but this proved impossible to agree (such statements require consensus). Nonetheless, Estonia had pushed the discussion further than many observers – this author included – had thought likely at the start of 2020, and inspired other Council members, including Indonesia, Kenya, China and the UK, to host related events, although it is not clear that any Council members will treat the issue as a priority in 2022.

Estonia’s Council term was not, therefore, solely defined by the crises accounted for here. Yet, its time on the Council was, inevitably, shaped by unforeseen and unfortunate events – and these shocks highlighted and exacerbated geopolitical tensions within the Council. It is to Estonia’s credit that it handled such events professionally and sometimes even courageously.

²⁰ This paragraph follows “[In Hindsight: The Security Council and Cyber Threats, An Update](#),” Security Council Report, 31 January 2022.

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