

World Leaders Gather at UN to Grapple Over Ukraine, Ebola, Islamic State

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Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin

UNITED NATIONS — World leaders will convene at the United Nations headquarters in New York this week to discuss a multitude of global crises — from Ebola to the Ukraine conflict, to the rights of indigenous people and combating the Islamic State.

“The world is facing multiple crises,” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said ahead of the UN's annual General Assembly meeting. “Each has its own dynamics and requires its own approach.”

Ukraine is eager for its own conflict to remain a high global priority, while Russia appears frustrated with Western dismissals of its reasoning, and the U.S. seems more concerned with fighting the Islamic State than butting heads with Moscow.

Poland has entered the fray as well, arguing in favor of a restriction of Russia's veto power in

the UN Security Council a move that, while far-fetched, has garnered international support.

“I am a supporter of a reform of the Security Council,” Ukraine's Foreign Minister Pavlo Klimkin, who is also at the UN this week, said Monday in an interview with The Moscow Times. “How can the whole system of the UN work in conditions when now we are talking about violations of key provisions of the very statute of the organization — that is the protection of territorial integrity, the protection of sovereignty, the borders.”

Patchwork of Global Crises

The General Assembly meeting — a round of high-level talks, arguments and diplomatic rituals known officially and euphemistically as the “general debate,” but taunted by some diplomats as “speed dating” in reference to its rapid-fire succession of brief meetings — comes against the backdrop of a range of crises that have courted heightened public attention.

Sections of Manhattan's East Side flanking the UN compound were cordoned off by police Monday as the first world conference on indigenous peoples began, followed by the Climate Summit on Tuesday.

When the General Assembly debate begins Wednesday, world leaders will take turns addressing a series of imminent threats and universal concerns dominating their countries' respective international agendas.

Russia Ready to Flex Its Muscles

For a defiant Russia, asserting strength as a global force appears to be a priority, as Moscow's alleged interference in Ukraine has cut a wedge in relations with many of its foreign counterparts. President Vladimir Putin, however, has chosen to stay away from the gathering. Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov will represent Russia in Putin's stead.

At a Security Council meeting convened at Russia's bidding last Friday on the probe into the Malaysia Airlines passenger jet downed over eastern Ukraine in July, U.S. Ambassador Samantha Power said that “Russia has no standing to offer advice on this investigation, and it has no credibility before this council in its professions, as its story has shifted for months.”

Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin responded with an angry outburst, arguing that any of his country's past transgressions should not undermine the validity of its position or its more recent statements.

“Though you may be sitting in the chairperson's seat, you have no right to make judgments about the standing of the Russian Federation in the Security Council,” Churkin told the U.S. ambassador, referring to America's acquisition this month of the council's rotating chairmanship. “Even if all you have said is true, this has nothing to do with the investigation into the downed plane.”

The spat was only the latest iteration in a series of quarrels that have plagued the council in recent months, pitting Russia against Ukraine and Western governments.

Britain has been among the strongest critics of Russia's policies on Ukraine, with British Ambassador Mark Lyall Grant saying at an emergency session in August that “violating

international law and the UN Charter in such a brazen manner is not compatible with Russia's responsibilities as a permanent member of the Security Council."

Calls to restrict Russia's authority on the Council peaked after Poland's President Bronislaw Komorowski — whose country is one of the most vocal opponents of Russia's actions in Ukraine — said he would work during his visit to the UN to appeal for a restriction of Moscow's power to veto Security Council decisions.

"My main message will be that perhaps the United Nations should be reformed to make the institution capable of addressing the threats that really exist today," Komorowski told The New York Times ahead of his departure for the U.S. "I think blocking the Security Council on Ukraine is a token, a symptom, of the general weakness of the UN."

Calls to reform the Security Council's veto procedures have circulated around the UN for months, diplomats said, albeit at a lower volume.

Ukrainian Ambassador Yuriy Sergeyev said during an interview with The Moscow Times on Monday that the proposal had previously been advanced by another permanent member of the Security Council, France. "Very strongly supporting this idea were the British. Not opposed to it were Americans," Sergeyev said.

But in reality, limiting Russia's veto power seems next to impossible. Article 108 of the UN Charter says that any changes must be approved by two-thirds of the organization's member states, and by all of the five permanent members of the Security Council, meaning that Russia would have to vote in favor of taking its own rights away.

"This all requires coordination between them [Security Council members] as to how much the holders of this right themselves are ready for self-restrictions," Sergeyev said.

U.S. Zeroes In on Islamic Terrorism

For the U.S., whose ambassador has sharply criticized Russia's policies in Ukraine during a sequence of Security Council meetings in recent weeks, the crisis appeared to have been shoved to the back burner in favor of the urgent threat of Islamic terrorism.

U.S. President Barack Obama is scheduled to address the General Assembly on Wednesday morning and chair a Security Council meeting later in the day, where the session is expected to focus on the threat posed by the Islamic State and the flow of foreign terrorists.

The issue also dominated the first news conference by U.S. ambassador Power, after her country took over the rotating presidency of the Security Council this month. Asked by reporters to comment on Ukraine at the close of the news conference, Power joked: "Haven't you heard enough from me on Ukraine?"

Ukraine Focuses on Cease-Fire

For Ukraine, the main issues on the agenda are ensuring a "sustainable cease-fire" with pro-Moscow separatists in the eastern regions, a "full withdrawal of Russian troops and heavy weaponry from Ukraine," and the sealing of the border to prevent future incursions, Ukraine's foreign minister said.

Ukraine wants the process to be monitored by envoys from the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. “All that should be verified transparently, independently and in an unbiased way — and that means by the OSCE observers,” Klimkin told a news conference Monday.

But that is another proposal that Moscow may receive less than enthusiastically.

In a bizarre assault against the OSCE, Russia's ambassador to the organization, Andrei Kelin, accused member states on Monday of “strengthening dangerous tendencies, such as rewriting history and glorifying the Nazis and their accomplices,” Russian state news agency TASS reported.

Accusations of Nazi sympathies were exactly the claim that Russia made against its opponents in Ukraine after the conflict broke out.

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