

Syrian Crises And The Failure Of The United Nations To Impose Sanctions: A Political Economy Approach

Samuel Asua Asua

Abstract

This paper explored the Syrian Crises and United Nations Sanctions from the political economy approach with the view of examining the role of the UN Security Council in the management of the Syrian crisis. In this article we ascertain the rationale behind Russia and China veto in the UN Security Council resolutions on Syria. This study has uncovered the division within Russia, China and USA, France and Britain, permanent members of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), in spite of their enviable roles in maintenance of global peace and security. This study posited that the division in Security Council barriers the UN Security Council resolutions in achieving peaceful and collective solution to the crises in Syria. This study relied on data from secondary sources, especially journals, books and online media reports that dwelt on the Syrian crises. This article adds to the ongoing debate on Syria. We adopted the Marxian political economy theoretical framework of analysis and argued that Russia and China vetoed the UN resolutions in order to protect her economic interests in Syria. The study recommends that the veto of the five permanent members should be removed in the charter and simple majority voting system should be adopted. Primarily, the veto was introduced to protect the interest of the 'Allied Forces' that defeated the 'Axis Forces' during the Second World War (WWII). The Security Council must persevere to enforce its resolutions so as to guarantee and preserve its credibility, respectability and above all, its integrity without the veto.

Keywords: Syrian Crises, United Nation Security Council, Political Economy, Russia's Interest, China's Interest, Sanctions.

Introduction

In history, conflict occurs when there is interaction between at least two individuals or groups whose ultimate objectives differ (Dappa, 2013). Conflict, which has been observed to be as old as man, has rather increased in spite of global development, with a growing speed. One wonders what has perpetuated this social cankerworm around the globe. That the emergence of conflicts has been traced to the following factors, the passion for power, wealth, fame, quest for minority rights, injustice, heterogeneous composition of the states, quest for ethnic identity, national interest and a purposeful partitioning of states into fragments by colonial masters (Mac-Ogonor, 2000). One of the basic interests of states is the pursuit of security objectives. This involves security against internal revolt and external aggression. However, the international system is very much

concerned with the problem of external aggression or conflict between states. However, it does not neglect internal conflicts due to its possible impact on the international system.

The pursuit of security makes it imperative that nation-states acquire power to deal with threats to their territorial integrity. As a result, there exists in the international system an inherent competition for power. This competition in a system that lacks the necessary instruments for the maintenance of law and order creates room for anarchy. It becomes important therefore to devise means to manage these conflicts which came from competition for power by the actors in the international system. Instruments for conflict management safeguard nation-states from both external aggression and internal conflicts that could threaten the security of the international system (Dappa, 2013).

It was for this reason that the international organizations were formed. The United Nations is a global organization that has universal membership and is committed to the maintenance of Global peace and security. The United Nations officially came into existence on 24th October, 1945 when the charter was ratified by China, France, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom, the United States and the majority of other signatories, hence United Nations , Charter VII contains provisions for conflict management, the provisions stipulated the means and method of management of conflict and its resolution. The interest of the permanent members of the UN Security Council has made the peace process, otherwise known as “Geneva Peace Talks” concerning Syria to be controversial, reaching stalemate which ended at an ‘impasse’ since “the occupy Syria” protest began (Plesch, 2010).

The state of Syria got her independence 17th April; 1946, the early year of independence were marked by political instability. In 1948, the Syrian armies were sent to Palestine to fight along with other Arab armies against the newly created state of Israel; the Arabs lost the war and Israel occupied 78 percent of the historical Palestine. In July 1949, Syria was the last Arab country to sign an armistice agreement with Israel. In 1949, Syria national government was overthrown by a military coup d’etat led by Hussnial al-Zaim. Al- Zaim was overthrown by his colleague Sami al-Hinnawi, a few months later; Hinnawi was overthrown by Adib al-Sheeshkli. The latter continued to rule the country until 1954, when growing public opposition forced him to resign and leave the country. The national government was restored; but again to face instability this time coming from abroad. In the mid 1950; Syria’s relation with the west witnessed some tension with the improving Syria-Soviet relations. The series of protest witnessed recently in these countries mark the culmination of resistance by the citizens (Jonathan, 2005). This resistance according to Primoz, 2011; includes political repression, discredited ideology, uneven economy, 2008 drought that caused mass exodus of tens of thousands impoverished farmer families into the already expanded urban slums and government’s refusal to help, rapidly growing young population, high level corruption on the part of the minority in power, state violence through government infamous Mukhabarat intelligence service, and minority rule through the Alawis Shiite religious group which the Assad family belongs.

Arab and Western diplomats and the UN Security Council drafted a resolution that called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad who assumed power in the year 2000 after the death of his father, Hafez that ruled Syria since 1970, to step down. Representatives from Russia and China slammed it as interference in the internal affairs of Syria without recognizing the policy of non-interference. According to VitalyChurkin, Russia Ambassador to the United Nations, the Council (UNSC) cannot impose such parameters for an internal political settlement. Russia and China argued that dialogue

should occur inside Syria. The Syrian crisis has been stage-managed by the division in the Security Council and thousands of lives have been lost. The United Nations Security Council has been unable to address the Syrian revolution that started in 2011. This study examines the rationale behind Russia and China veto in the UN Security Council resolutions in achieving a peaceful regime in Syria through internal harmony with Bashar al-Assad still at the helm of affair in a coalition government.

Theoretical Perspective

This study is discussed under the framework of Marxian political economy expounded by Karl Marx critically reviewed by the Hegelian philosophy of right which appeared in 1884. Hegel found that material (economic) life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general. In the word of Marx, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their being, but on the contrary, their social being determine their consciousness”. Hence, dialectical materialism is characterized by:

- Dynamic character of social reality;
- Interrelatedness of different levels of structure; and
- Primacy of material condition.

In adopting the Marxist political economy as the analytical guide of this study, we emphasized such objects of analysis like: the relations of production of goods and services, distribution of national resources and the attendant crises arising from both the relations of production and the distribution of national resources. We emphasize these because they are among the factors of economic indices that had always generated conflict and crises in the societies more especially in the states of Africa. Very often, both the relations of production and distribution of natural resources are characterized by conflicts antagonism consequent upon which the motive propelling different conflicting factional leaders are seen in terms of endless struggle for a position of dominance not only in the state power in general but also particularly in the material production and distribution in the state. At this juncture, statism is seen as the most potent and coercive instrument or structure with which to achieve dominance in the society, and thereby making politics to take predominance over economy. Hence production becomes synonymous with power acquisition so that politics equally means production.

Moreover, in terms of focus, it highlights the primacy of the material conditions of life (Ake, 1981). Political economy approach attempts to show how the interplay of politics and economics affects reforms in societies and the global economic structure with which state and other economic entities contact and interact in world economic system. No wonder Russia and China continued veto the UN Security Council resolutions where they have economic interest. Syria is a crucial market for Russia arms; on the other hand, China’s interests in Syria revolve around the volume of bilateral trade between China and Arab countries.

The Overview Of The Syrian Crisis

The crisis in Syria was prompted by protests in mid-March 2011 calling for the release of political prisoners. National security forces responded to widespread, initially peaceful demonstrations with brutal violence. From summer 2011 onwards, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad refused to halt attacks and implement the meaningful reforms demanded by protestors. In July 2011, accounts emerged from witnesses, victims, the media, and civil society that government forces had subjected civilians to

arbitrary detention, torture, and the deployment and use of heavy artillery. The Syrian people were also subject to the Shabiha, a heavily armed state-sponsored militia fighting alongside security forces. Assad consistently denied responsibility for these crimes, placing blame for the violence on armed groups and terrorists, and yet denying humanitarian access to civilians. Alongside the worsening violence, this lack of assistance from the UN and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) caused severe shortages of food, water and healthcare in the country (www.responsibilitytoprotect.org).

As the crisis continued to escalate, opponents of the Assad regime began to loosely organize, creating several opposition organizations such as the Syrian National Council (SNC), an umbrella organization of exiled Syrians, and the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a militarized element largely composed of Syrian military defectors and armed rebels. Though ideological divisions have characterized the fragmented opposition, many groups lost patience with the lack of progress on reforms and began to call the regime's resignation since the fall of 2011. In August 2011, the FSA began attacking Syrian soldiers with force, marking the first time that the opposition resorted to violence to overthrow the regime and end the government's widespread attacks on civilians. With the introduction of these new militant tactics came reports that opposition forces had also subjected civilians to human rights violations. The conflict has also grown increasingly sectarian in nature, with civilians being targeted by both sides based on the presumed support or opposition to the Assad regime associated with their ethnic identities (Moaz, 2013).

Though the government-imposed media blackout since March 2011 has made it very difficult for foreign press to have "first – hand" information and know the true situation in Syria. The United Nations Human Rights Council established an independent International Commission of Inquiry in September 2011 to investigate the alleged human rights violations. The Commission has since produced five reports and concluded that the Syrian government and Shabiha committed crimes against humanity and war crimes, as well as that anti-government groups have been responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity (www.responsibilitytoprotect.org).

UN Doctrine of Collective Security and the Syrian Crises

The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) is one of the principal organs of the United Nations. The UN Member States have conferred the primary responsibility of maintenance of international peace and security to the Security Council and have agreed that this body, in order to carry on this duty, acts on their behalf. The Member States have agreed to accept and carry out the decisions of the Security Council through article 25 of the Charter. While other organs of the United Nations can only make recommendations to governments, the UNSC is the only organ capable of issuing resolutions that are legally binding on all Member States (Source: The UN Security Council Website, <http://www.un.org/Docs/sc/index.html>, viewed 23 August 2011).

In order to fulfill its responsibility of maintaining international peace and security and when faced with a conflict, the first action of the Council is to recommend to the parties that they reach agreement through peaceful means. It may appoint special representatives, may ask the Secretary-General to appoint special representatives, and may set some principles for the peaceful settlement of the conflict. When a dispute leads to fighting, the UNSC will try to bring it to an end as soon as possible. It can do so by issuing ceasefire directives, sending UN peacekeeping forces or eventually deciding on

enforcement actions such as economic sanctions or collective military action (Dappa, 2013).

Article 27 of the UN Charter allows the permanent members of the Security Council to quash any non-procedural draft resolution with their negative votes, irrespective of its level of international support and popularity. This power is referred to as the “veto power” of the Permanent Five although the word “veto” is never mentioned in the Charter. The initial reason for the inclusion of this power in the Charter was to prevent the UN General Assembly (UNGA) from taking direct actions against any of its principal founding members – the Allied Forces of the Second World War. The use of veto power has become a tool for protecting national interests of permanent members or their strategic allies. This power has been responsible for the silence of the Security Council on some major international conflicts including the 2003 Iraq War, the 2008 conflict in Georgia, the 2009 massacre of Sri Lankan Tamils and the recent Syrian Crises (Okhovat, 2011).

The Syrian Crises that began in March 2011 has metamorphosed into a violent civil war with strong sectarian overtones. And the intrastate armed conflict, resulting in the estimated over 150,000 deaths, it has divided the international community while the United States, the European Union, Turkey, and the Gulf countries particularly Qatar and Saudi Arabia have openly sided with the armed opposition to President Bashar al-Assad. Russia and China have opposed any pressure on Damascus, raising doubt over the credibility and effectiveness of its Security Council (Dmitri, 2013).

The Security Council has been deadlocked on how to end the Syrian Crises. President Bashar al-Assad's close ally Russia, with the aid of China, has used its veto power to block any condemnations or attempts to sanction Assad's government. Both Russia and China have consistently resisted the Security Council's attempt to introduce sanctions on Damascus, meaning their veto was no surprise, but the strength of the response from those in favour gave some indication of the frustrations behind the scenes. Britain's foreign secretary, William Hague condemned the two vetoing the resolution as “inexcusable and indefensible” adding that Russia and China had “turned their back on the people of Syria in their darkest hour” (Dappa, 2013). It is the duty of the Security Council to apply the doctrine of collective security in resolving or managing the Syrian crisis, but the veto power wielded to the permanent members of the Security Council is always used to protect the interests of the permanent big five, thereby making it difficult for the smooth running of the Security Council or making it ineffective when the need arises. The veto of Russia and China had debunked the principle of collective security hence the doctrine of collective security is implicated in the Syrian crisis (Dappa, 2013).

Russia's position is also important in light of her common stand and same position with China, a rising global power that is still generally reluctant to oppose the West alone on issues that do not affect its own immediate interests. However, Beijing has occasionally joined Moscow in opposing selected issues, allowing the Russians to take the lead (and the heat), thus creating a pattern of Sino-Russian opposition to the United States and Europe. This tension between the recognition of power politics through the Security Council veto, and the universal ideas underlying the UN, is a defining feature of the organization. One could only hope that one day; Russia and China will stop protecting Assad and allow this council to play its proper role at the centre of the international response to the crisis in Syria.

Russia And China’s Interest In Syria

Russia and China attracted significant criticisms from Arab and Western leaders for their economic, political and military ties to Syria, and because they vetoed against three UN Security Council members (U.S.A; France and Britain) resolutions, though widely interpreted as the anti-western duo in the UN Security Council, China and Russia in fact have different calculations for casting their respective vetoes their way on the UN resolution for Syria. With little stakes involved in Syria, Chinese vetoes are a performative move, announcing to the world that the country will take a more proactive approach in future international conflict.

Table 1 below highlights the interest of Russia and China in Syria.

TABLE 1: Interest of Russia and China

Country	Interest in Syria
Russia	<p>Accounts for 78percent of Syria’s weapons purchases between 2007 and 2012. In fact, trade between Syria and Russia shot up by 58% to \$1.97 billion in 2011.</p> <p>Russian companies have invested \$20 billion in Syria since 2009.</p> <p>Russia also signed a \$550 million deal with Syria for Combat training jets.</p> <p>Russia also leases a naval facility at the Syrian port of Tartus, giving Russian navy its only direct access to the Mediterranean.</p> <p>Russian loans to Assad, Moscow flew more than two hundred tons of “banknotes” to the Syrian regime in 2011. One reason Assad has managed to avoid bankruptcy and keep paying his forces as the country’s foreign reserves have dwindled.</p> <p>Russian takes Syria’s Crude oil in exchange for refined oil products to sustain the country’s military and economy.</p>
China	<p>Became Syria’s largest supplier of imported products. Syria is third-largest importers from china as suggested by European Commission data (2010).</p> <p>China opposed western led-invasion under whatever pretext.</p> <p>Syria is a close ally of Iran, by keeping the Syrian regime intact, or more importantly, preventing a pro-western replacement, China is in fact ensuring that Iran retains its regional support and will not fall prey to another western-led invasion.</p> <p>In 2012, China-Syria trade was worth \$1.2 billion, a 50 percent decrease over 2011 rates (possibly because of the war).</p>

Source: Wong (2012) and Borshchevskaya (2013) compiled by the author.

Recommendations

This study makes the following recommendations:

- That there is a need for a broad consensus among members as a condition for enforcement action. The Security Council must also persevere to enforce its resolutions so as to guarantee its credibility, respectability and above all its integrity.
- That the veto of the five permanent members should be removed in the charter and simple majority voting system should be adopted, because the veto is used by the

permanent members to frustrate the mechanism of the collective security of the Security Council of the United Nations.

- Dialogue, negotiation and arbitration should be used between government and citizens before resorting to war. The people of Syria should settle the dispute themselves because outsiders will only key in their interest first before the interest of the Syrians.
- That there is need for unanimity among members to ensure prompt, competent and consistent Security Council enforcement action.

Conclusion

The UN Security Council has the responsibility of maintaining global peace and security, the Security Council has been faced with considerable criticism for failing to address the crises months after protests had begun, and its subsequent inability to reach a consensus on how to move forward. A large part of the criticism is due to the structure of the Council that many believe is undemocratic especially because it gives considerable power and privileges to certain countries of the world. Dickson (2013) argued that there appears to be an underlying reluctance on the part of all states to participate in an enforcement process. Rather, they tend to act in accord with what they perceived as national interest and foreign policy goals.

Russia and China are two faithful allies of the Syrian regime. Their strategic and economic interests tend to inform their support for President Bashar al-Assad's regime as against promoting collective security on the issue. Furthermore, China's decision to collaborate with Russia in vetoing the United Nations Security resolution against Syria displayed their mutual determination to check US unilateralism on issues of global governance, their action have undermined the UN multilateral approach to international peace and security.

References

- Ake, C. (1981). *The Political Economy of Africa*. Ibadan: Longman.
- Ezeibe, C. (2011). "The political Economy of US Invasion of Iraq". *International Journal of Modern Political Economy*. 2(2) 44-53.
- Mac-Ogonor, C. (2000). *The UN, NATO and the Post Cold War Management of Global Peace*. Port Harcourt: Rostian.
- Plesch, D. (2010). "America, Hitler and the UN: How the Allies Won World War II and Forged A Peace". Available at: <http://hsozkult.geschichte.hu-berlin.de/rezensionen/id=16208>. Accessed on: 1st October, 2013.
- Laub, Z. and Jonathan, M. (2013). "Syrian Crisis and the Global Response". Available at: <http://www.cfr.org/syria/syrias-crisis-global-response>. Accessed on: 29/ 11/13
- United Nations Security Council. *Security Council Resolutions*. Available at: <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/index.shtml>. Accessed on: 29/11/13.

- Okhovat, S. (2011). "U.N. Security Council Deadlocked in Syria". Available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/Why%20Russia,%20Iran%20and%20China%20are%20standing%20by%20Syria%20-%20CNN.com.html>. Accessed on: 24 August 2013.
- Trenin, D., Salem, P. and et al (2013). "The Mythical Alliance: Russia's Syrian Policy". Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/03/20/mythical-alliance-russia-syria-policy/frha>. Accessed on: 10th, December, 2013.
- Dappa, O. T. (2013). "United Nations and the Politics of Sanctions: The Syrian Debacle". M.Sc. Project Report Submitted to the Department of Political Science University of Nigeria, Nsukka.
- Dickson, M. E. (2013). "The Problem of Enforcement of the United Nations (UN) Armistice Resolutions: A Case Study of the 1991 Security Council Gulf war Resolution 687". Ph.D. Thesis Submitted to the Postgraduate School, University of Uyo, Uyo.
- Moaz, A. (2013). "The Crisis in Syria". Available at: <http://www.responsibilitytoprotect.org/Crisis%20in%20Syria.htm>. Accessed on: 17th October, 2013.
- Primoz M. (2012). "Top Ten Reasons for the Uprising in Syria". Available at: <http://www.middleeast.about.com>About.com>News and Issues>middle East Issues>Countries> Syria>. Accessed on: 25th June, 2014.
- Wong, N. (2012). "China's Veto on Syria: What Interests are at Play?" Available at: <http://www.opendemocracy.net/china's-veto-on-syria-what-interests-are-at-play.html>. Accessed on: 5th October, 2013.
- Borshchevskaya, A. (2013). *Russia's Many Interests in Syria*. Available at: <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/russias-many-interests-in-syria.html>. Accessed on: 6th June, 2013.