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The UN Charter Is Our Rules!

Interview with Anna M. Evstigneeva,

Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations



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Abstract. The practice of the functioning of the United Nations and the actual mechanisms of peacekeeping differ significantly from the theoretical ideas about them. Anna Mikhailovna Evstigneeva, Deputy Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation to the United Nations (UN), who has been dealing with peacekeeping issues for many years, answers a number of important questions about contemporary peacekeeping and peacebuilding in her interview. She argues that while the West is building a “rules-based order,” for Russia the rules are the UN Charter. The key to ensuring the effectiveness of an international organization, according to A.M. Evstigneeva, is the ability of the parties to reach mutually beneficial solutions and to take each other’s interests into account. The rest is a “superstructure,” which, however, is partially enshrined in the doctrine. Dozens of factors (dialogue with civil society, gender, climate, etc.) play a special role, which over time become universal. Often, the beautiful Western theories of liberal peacebuilding do not stand up to the harsh reality; and in a number of cases there is silence on the part of decision-makers about the real situation on the ground. This interview highlights the challenges of the existing system of international peacekeeping in the context of the formation of a multipolar world.

Key words: peacekeeping, UN, Security Council, consent of the parties, impartiality, foreign policy, conflicts, Russian Federation, Responsibility to Protect, R2P

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Устав ООН — это наши правила!

*Интервью с Анной Михайловной Евстигнеевой,
заместителем Постоянного представителя Российской Федерации при ООН*

Аннотация. Практика функционирования Организации Объединенных Наций (ООН) и реальные механизмы миротворчества существенно отличаются от теоретических представлений о них. В ходе интервью Анна Михайловна Евстигнеева, заместитель Постоянного представителя Российской Федерации при ООН, которая много лет занималась проблематикой миротворчества, отвечает на ряд важных вопросов, касающихся современного миротворчества и миростроительства. По ее мнению, если Запад строит «порядок, основанный на правилах», то для России правила — это Устав ООН. Ключевой момент в обеспечении эффективности международной организации, по мнению А.М. Евстигнеевой, — это возможность сторон выходить на взаимовыгодные решения и учитывать интересы друг друга. Остальное — это «надстройка», которая, тем не менее, частично закреплена в доктрине. Особую роль при этом играют десятки факторов (диалог с гражданским обществом, гендер, климат и др.), которым со временем придается универсальный характер. Зачастую красивые западные теории либерального миротворчества не выдерживают столкновения с суровой реальностью, в ряде случаев имеет место умолчание ответственных лиц о реальной обстановке на местах. Данное интервью наглядно показывает вызовы существующей системы международного миротворчества в контексте формирования многополярного мира.

Ключевые слова: миротворчество, ООН, Совет Безопасности, согласие сторон, беспристрастность, внешняя политика, конфликты, Российская Федерация, ответственность по защите, R2P

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— **Dear Anna Mikhailovna, Russia traditionally stands up for the central role of the United Nations (UN) in world politics. However, in recent years, according to the Minister of Foreign Affairs S.V. Lavrov, the UN has lost “its reputation as a platform for honest discussions aimed at finding a balance of interests of all member states.”¹ What is the reason for this?**

— Undoubtedly, Russia stands for the central role of the United Nations in world politics. This is the world order that was established as a result of the Second World War,

¹ Speech by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation Sergey Lavrov at the general political discussion of the 77th session of the UN General Assembly, New York, September 24, 2022 // Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. September 25, 2022. (In Russian). URL: https://www.mid.ru/ru/press_service/minister_speeches/1831211/ (accessed: 21.06.2023).

and it ensured the Soviet Union and, consequently, Russia a key role in world affairs. Our country is a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. We respect the UN Charter — “these are our rules” (a reference to the Western “rules-based order.” – *Editor’s note*), we are consistent in fulfilling our commitments. And, most importantly at the moment, the UN is still the only universal Organization, to which there are no alternatives and which we do not yet see. However, all these parameters do not guarantee that the UN mechanism is ideal, that it does not malfunction, and even more so that it is not subject to erosion over time. It is, therefore, impossible not to agree with Minister Sergey V. Lavrov.

There is a common response to the charge that the UN is ineffective — it is only as effective as its member states make it effective.

In particular, the extent to which they are willing to negotiate with each other, to seek mutually beneficial solutions, and to consider each other's interests. And therein lies the rub. It must be recognized that no one, and especially not Western countries, seeks agreement only for the sake of agreement itself, and that the basis of any negotiation is the desire of the parties to achieve maximum consideration of their interests. In this case, if there is an opportunity to negotiate or force the opposite side to make more favorable decisions, everything will be done to achieve this goal.

Over the past decades, Western countries have wasted no time in actively using the situation to consolidate their approaches as the only correct ones, promoting their ideology both among the member states and in the UN Secretariat. It would be unfair not to admit that these efforts have been ineffective. Quite effective. But therein lies the error of the system. Humanistic slogans (in the UN we call it the moral high ground) cannot be used endlessly just to stick to one's own line and exploit the system to one's own advantage (Beckley & Waters, 2008). In simple words — demanding that countries adopt democracy and liberal values when in fact people have nothing to eat.

Much is being done through the organization, but it should also be noted that the UN no longer fully meets the expectations placed on it. The slogans are there, the reputation is still more or less there, but there are fewer and fewer results. There is also less confidence in the decisions made on the UN platform. A good example is the General Assembly, whose resolutions contain provisions that many member states may not like, but when it comes to making decisions, they come to the conclusion that “it's not worth it” and then simply have to rely on their own strength. As a result, all this is accepted and accumulates like a snowball.

The days of heated battles over principled positions are over; and for many developing countries it is important to get concrete funding.

The situation in the Security Council is similar. Many decisions, especially on general issues, are taken in a “one-day” format: they are voted on, announced in the media, but most likely no one will ever return to them.² Another thing is country-specific resolutions that imply some kind of coercive measures or fateful decisions (including mandates for peacekeeping operations). They are much more difficult to agree on. But even in this case, we are faced with the opinion of the host countries: let some paragraphs that do not correspond to their interests be adopted, the main thing is the fate of the mission for the foreseeable future.

— The aggravation of international contradictions between the countries of the “collective West” and the rest of the world, the increasing complexity of contemporary crises and their rapid internationalization are testing the strength of the rather conservative UN peacekeeping mechanisms and tools. There is a growing gap between doctrine and practice. Such principles as consent, impartiality, “common interest” and non-use of force are unfortunately not always applied in the UN peacekeeping practice. What might be the consequences of this discrepancy?

— I wouldn't call the UN peacekeeping toolkit a “conservative practice.” In fact, there's not much that's new here. It all boils down to the need to “negotiate” and to find a person or persons (mediators) who can help with this. In this regard, I've paid attention to the article by L. Brahimi³ and S. Ahmed⁴ entitled “In Pursuit

² ‘Pragmatism, Not Populism’ Will Overcome Global Inertia, Chilean President tells UN // The United Nations. September 21, 2016. URL: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2016/09/539762> (accessed: 21.06.2023).

³ Lakhdar Brahimi (b. 1934), Minister of Foreign Affairs of Algeria (1991—1993), has worked in the UN system for several decades. In different years, he was the UN Special Representative in Haiti, Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria. In 2000, he chaired the UN Peace Operations Group, in which capacity he issued the final report on improving the effectiveness of UN peacekeeping (the Brahimi Report): Report of the Panel on United Nations Peace Operations. A/55/305, S/2000/809 // The United Nations.

of Sustainable Peace. The Seven Deadly Sins of Mediation” (Brahimi & Ahmed, 2023). Written in May of this year, the authors bring us back to reality.

Then it is necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the agreements under which peacekeeping operations are deployed (this is precisely about “the peace to keep”). Unfortunately, the picture in this area is not very favorable: it is enough to go through the main countries hosting peacekeeping missions and see what has been done where and in what timeframe (which, incidentally, in some cases explains the length of stay of peacekeepers in the countries of deployment). If, in addition to this, there are so-called asymmetric threats in the country (in other words, terrorists or militants who are not party to the agreement), and national security agencies are weak, then the picture becomes even more complex, to which the UN has not yet developed a pragmatic response.

Most of the other doctrinal aspects are “superstructure.” And the less opportunities there are to realize the essence of the main political task, the more the “superstructure” grows. This is what we see in the example of the UN. In our case, the UN, the setting is often fixed in the doctrine. In other words, various components are added to it, without which it is impossible to reach an agreement. It is necessary to take into account dozens of factors that over time acquire a general (and supposedly universal) character: peace is impossible if civil society is not consulted, if an agreement is concluded without the participation of women

and youth, without taking into account climatic factors, if some specific conditions for the administration of justice are not created, and so on (Lebedeva, 2023, pp. 13—14). Each of these factors may be relevant in a particular situation, but it is really conditioned by its specifics, not by any doctrine.

The problem is that Western countries, as the authors of this approach, have learnt well how to use its levers. To use different components of these doctrines when they need them. And in this regard, the UN bureaucracy, adapted to their respective patterns, works for them. But when the principles of these doctrines work the other way around, they are cancelled. Look at who and when cared about the rights of the Russian-speaking population in Ukraine, the children’s casualties in Donbass, or the suppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (UOC). Just recently, the West objected to Russia’s proposed civil society speaker (a priest of the UOC), stating that “There are too many civil society representatives speaking at the Security Council.”⁵ Although it was they who initiated and consistently promoted their participation in the Council.

Let me give another example. The good old principle of consent of the parties: the Special Representative in Sudan appointed by the Secretary General, F. Pertes, lost the trust of the Sudanese, they asked for his replacement, but the Secretary General refused, and Khartoum was forced to declare him *persona non grata*.⁶ Western countries continue to insist that he must fulfill his duties — after all, you can’t just deny credibility to a high-ranking UN official!⁷

2000. URL: https://peacekeeping.un.org/sites/default/files/a_55_305_e_brahimi_report.pdf (accessed: 21.06.2023).

⁴ Salman Ahmed, Director of Policy Planning in the Office of the US President J. Biden since 2021, previously has worked for 8 years in the administration of President B. Obama. He participated in the planning of the UN field missions in Iraq (2003—2004), Afghanistan (2001—2002), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1996—1998), South Africa (1994) and Cambodia (1992—1993). In 2002, he served as Secretary of the Panel on UN Peace Operations and contributed to the Brahimi Report. He has been a fellow at the Carnegie Endowment and has taught at Princeton University.

⁵ Bratsky Ya. Polyansky: The Suspension of the UOC Priest from the UN Security Council Meeting is a Blatant Abuse // Zvezda TV Channel. July 26, 2023. (In Russian). URL: <https://tvzvezda.ru/news/20237262011-7awKH.html> (accessed: 27.07.2023).

⁶ Sudan Declares UN Envoy Volker Perthes “Persona Non Grata” // AfricaNews. June 9, 2023. URL: <https://www.africanews.com/2023/06/09/sudan-declares-un-envoy-volker-perthes-persona-non-grata/> (accessed: 22.06.2023).

⁷ UN Says Sudan Cannot Apply *Persona Non Grata* To UN Envoy // Reuters. June 9, 2023. URL:

F. Pertes has no access to the country, he cannot fulfill his functions, there is an acute conflict in Sudan, and the Security Council is still debating whether this person is legitimate or not.

Impartiality is a separate issue, as everyone understands it differently (Boulden, 2005; Donald, 2002; Rhoads, 2016; Yamashita, 2008). Can a UN official who compromises “universally accepted principles” for the sake of peace be considered impartial? When it comes to guaranteeing the physical safety of politicians who may have committed serious crimes for the sake of ending war and loss of life?

As for the use or non-use of force (this is especially important in peacekeeping), the issue is also politically motivated. There is no problem for a peacekeeper to use force in a specific situation (attacks on civilians or on himself). The problem arises when the use of force by peacekeepers is tantamount to taking sides in the conflict.

The “old new” option of “peace enforcement” operations based on coalitions of interested countries, regional and sub-regional organizations (primarily African) with the involvement of the UN funding is now being actively discussed (Bokeriya, 2022; Khudaykulova, 2023). But there are also many pitfalls here, the most important of which, in my opinion, is the ability to ensure political solidarity regarding the goals and parameters of their implementation, not only among global actors, but also among the members of these associations themselves.

— **The Foreign Policy Concept of the Russian Federation, adopted in 2023, states that the priority is to “increase Russia’s role in peacekeeping activities (including within the framework of cooperation with the UN, regional international organizations and parties to conflicts) and strengthen the peacekeeping and crisis management**

<https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/un-says-sudan-cannot-apply-persona-non-grata-un-envoy-2023-06-09/> (accessed: 22.06.2023).

capacities of the UN and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).”⁸ In your opinion, how will the increased role of the Russian Federation in international peacekeeping be implemented in practice?

— I fully agree with the concept of Russian foreign policy. Russia is a “country-warrior,” and therefore a peacemaker who knows the value of human life and the sacrifice that can be made for it. Peacekeeping is not necessarily United Nations peacekeeping. These are Georgia before 2008, Transnistria (Shevchuk, 2023), and Nagorno-Karabakh now. The participation of the CSTO forces in Kazakhstan in 2022 is the highest level (Syssoyeva, 2023). It will also be necessary to study the current experience of the Russians contributing to the stabilization of the situation in African countries, to the training of their national capabilities in countering threats, including terrorist ones.⁹ I believe that in the issue of enhancing Russia’s role in international peacekeeping, it is necessary to proceed from the meaning rather than from specific figures, for example, the presence in the UN peacekeeping contingents.

— **Despite more than 20 years of international and regional efforts to increase the number and active involvement of women in peacekeeping, the number of women in peacekeeping operations in Africa remains low. What is the position of the Russian Federation on this issue?**

— Russia supports the involvement of women in peacekeeping operations. Especially in the current circumstances, when UN peacekeeping operations have very broad mandates. Their participation is important in areas related to ensuring the safety of women

⁸ Concept of Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation, March 31, 2023 // The President of Russia. (In Russian). URL: <http://kremlin.ru/events/president/news/70811> (accessed: 22.06.2023).

⁹ See the article of A.L. Bovdunov in this issue (*Editor’s note*).

and children and investigating crimes against them. The contribution of women peacekeepers is not limited to these functions, but is widely needed in other situations as well. But I am sure that there can be no automaticity. Peacekeeping units are mostly part of national armed forces or law enforcement agencies. It does not matter whether they are men or women; the main thing is that they do the job.

— **Africa is considered to be the most conflict-prone continent in the world. Many states, including through the UN, are involved in the processes of settling African crises. What is the reason for the African continent’s sad leadership — unfinished decolonization? Lack of coordination with regional (African Union) and sub-regional organizations (Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and others) or something else? What is Russia’s role in ensuring peace and security in Africa?**

— The topic of Africa’s highest conflict potential seems to be a somewhat far-fetched thesis that is convenient for many. It requires an analysis of statistics with a precise calculation of the number of crises and their victims by time period. To what extent, for example, do losses in world wars correlate with losses in conflicts in Africa in the same period? If we look at more recent periods, then we must not forget that at the end of the last century there was a series of civil wars in Angola, Chad and Sierra Leone. The war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and the genocide in Rwanda were also 20—30 years ago. I saw a statistic somewhere that African conflicts are not the bloodiest at the moment. In Syria, Yemen, and other non-African conflicts, the death toll is higher. It is very important to recognize (and talk about) that African countries, the African Union and sub-regional organizations have made significant progress in containing such events. At the moment, we are following the events in Niger. The coup d’état in that country took place without casualties,

but there is a risk of a big war in the region, which will be bloody.

At the same time, I believe that the principle of “African problems — African solutions” is relevant, even in the light of the fact that such a forceful solution is being discussed in ECOWAS.¹⁰ Many crisis situations (such as in West Africa) would not have happened if there had not been interference in the affairs of African states (such as in Libya, including in terms of undermining regional efforts), the legacy of colonialism, external influence on decision-making processes at the national and regional levels. But the way to reduce dependence on these factors is far from simple, it consists not only in political, but also in economic, socio-cultural aspects.

As for Russia, we should not view our assistance to Africa through the prism of our complex relationship with the West. This is a self-sufficient region, with a promising population that has learnt somewhere and is learning to respect itself. We should help Africa to become strong and independent, at least to get as much “space and time” as possible. Russia does not need to try to make anyone dependent on it (besides, we do not have such resources) or to impose its ideology.

— **In recent years, the most innovative approaches to peacebuilding have proliferated. A number of international organizations are placing special emphasis on countering the radicalization of young people. In Asia, Africa and Latin America, traditional institutions, including religious ones, are being involved in the settlement of regional conflicts. In your opinion, what are the most effective “recipes” in this field today? What is the ratio between universal and regional practices?**

— Peacebuilding is indeed one of the most popular ideas in the UN for dealing with conflict, and there are quite realistic discussions

¹⁰ See the article of T.S. Denisova and S.V. Kostelyanets in this issue (*Editor’s note*).

about increasing funding from the regular UN budget. One could argue about innovation, although I have heard the idea of replacing all peacekeeping operations with some kind of peacebuilding missions. However, the essence here is the same, whatever you call it — there are no universal recipes for conflict situations. There is a specific situation that needs to be addressed in a substantive way, and the causes of that situation need to be addressed in an objective way. If it is terrorism — fight it militarily, if it is regional inequality — overcome it with development aid, if state institutions are weak — build them and extend them to the backward parts of the country.

As S. Huntington said, states must first control their territory and then control themselves (Huntington, 1993, p. 29). Work with youth or some measures in the field of women's rights are certainly important, but efforts in this area alone cannot solve fundamental problems. There are no one-size-fits-all solutions; in fact, they may all be subjective and arbitrary. The role of regional platforms is increasing. However, in my opinion, national, state proposals will remain the most effective, including when it comes to involving traditional institutions or religious leaders (Krashennikova, 2019).

— In your opinion, who really shapes new approaches to peacemaking and peacebuilding in the modern world — theorists or practitioners?

— The role of both theorists and practitioners is important. Unfortunately, most of the theoretical proposals that I have seen in my work as a diplomat over the past 15 years have somehow come “from the West” and have been based on liberal approaches. It usually looks good on paper, but you forget about the potential difficulties. Such “beautiful theories” are the most popular in the UN. Moreover, these same Europeans have powerful human, financial and institutional resources to promote them. You meet practitioners somewhat less

often, but it is much more interesting to talk to them, as they are more realistic in their approaches.

Many, by the way, advocate forceful methods of peacekeeping, dialogue with all parties to the conflict, including rebels, radical groups, etc., and turn a blind eye to the features of “democratic processes” when they know that “required by the international community” can lead to destabilization. As one of the Secretary General's Special Envoys, whom I respect, said, elections as required by the UN Security Council and most Western countries cannot be held now in the country he supervises, as it will lead to further division not only of the elites, but also of the country. It is regrettable that such people cannot say this directly in the Security Council or in public. Others do the opposite, as prescribed in the “training manual” — this happened in Sudan, which I mentioned above: in many ways, it was the “itch for democratic change” and the desire to show results as soon as possible that led to the escalation of the current confrontation.

— It seems that most conceptual approaches to contemporary peacekeeping have been developed by theorists and practitioners in Western countries, including the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) concept. To what extent do these approaches correspond to modern realities?

— The problem with liberal Western ideology or peacekeeping theory is not even that it is wrong in itself, but that these ideologues are convinced that their approaches are the only correct and universal ones. Even if they are not accepted by those they are aimed at and do not produce sustainable results. In addition, in the transition to “practice,” geopolitics begins to play a key role, rebuilding the whole “theory” for itself.

The concept of “Responsibility to Protect” is a good example. Its basic idea is humanistic and aims to protect people (Bokeriya, 2018). But if we look at examples of its application, we

are horrified by the thousands of victims. I really hope (even if it sounds cynical) that after Libya, R2P has been laid to rest (Khudaykulova, 2016). Intervening in this country in 2011, under a noble pretext, caused such damage to that country, to half of Africa and even to Europe itself, that people will shudder at references to the “responsibility to protect” for a long time to come. Although, to repeat, the actual meaning of the idea will always be relevant. In fact, Russia’s actions in Crimea and Donbass are also partly R2P.

— **What is Russia’s role in the conceptual rethinking of peacekeeping and peacebuilding? What is unique about the Russian approach?**

In my opinion, Russia is playing a major role in the conceptual rethinking of peacekeeping and peacebuilding. We are

actively participating in discussions on these issues in the Security Council, the Peacebuilding Commission and the General Assembly. In discussions on general issues, we are in many ways the “voice of reason” and promote appropriate assessments. The same is true in discussions on the mandates of peacekeeping missions. We are often the “last hope” for host states that rely on our support, as well as for people working “on the ground”. I wish we had more active representatives in field missions who would implement our approaches (Amara, Degterev & Egamov, 2022), so that Russian diplomats and theorists would have more opportunities to study the activities of the UN presences, including in Africa. There are certain objective gaps in this, but I expect that they will be overcome in the very near future.

Interviewed by D.A. Degterev

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