

Security Council or Secret Society?

By Colum Lynch, Tuesday, June 15, 2010



The U.N. Security Council had a lot on its plate Monday. There were dueling briefings by South Korean and North Korean delegations on the March 26 sinking of the South Korean naval ship, the Cheonan. Then came a U.N. briefing on the crisis unfolding in Kyrgyzstan, where Kyrgyz mobs have driven more than 150,000 ethnic Uzbeks across the border to Uzbekistan. There was also a high-profile meeting on Sudan with the participation of the all the U.N. and African Union's top envoys, including **Ibrahim Gambari** and **Thabo Mbeki**.

But you wouldn't have known any of that by looking at the Security Council schedule. Yesterday's **U.N. daily journal** noted that the council would be discussing the "adoption of the agenda" -- whatever that means -- in addition to deliberating on a "report of the secretary general on the Sudan." No mention of the Cheonan, or Uzbekistan, or Thabo Mbeki and the African Union.

This was no mistake. The terse, daily notices on the happenings of the world's premier security body are often designed to be vague. The curious reality is that the 15-nation council is frequently unwilling to formally acknowledge that it is meeting to discuss the many security crises that land on its door.

The problem is that once an issue is officially "placed on the agenda" of the Security Council, it's hard to get it off, granting the U.N. Security Council an open-ended opportunity to play a role in the affairs of a politically sensitive or unstable region.

Russia and China, fearing Western attempts to meddle in their own spheres of influence, have frequently resisted requests by the Western powers to formally discuss crises. The two powers have sought to block official meetings on Burma, Zimbabwe and Sri Lanka. The United States has also long opposed any effort to place new crises involving its closest allies, particularly Israel, on the council's agenda. Other smaller countries, including Colombia, Sri Lanka, and Uganda, have also struggled to keep their names off the council's agenda, a distinction that states often find demeaning.

"There is a serious allergy to being on the council's agenda," said **Colin Keating**, a former New Zealand ambassador to the United Nations who heads a Columbia University-affiliated think tank, The Security Council Report. Keating said the decision to hold off-the-books meetings has created greater opportunities for countries to discuss international problems. "The practice involves the recognition that sometimes if you want progress on some of these tough issues, one of the keys to moving forward is to have some ambiguity about whether the council" is formally responsible for dealing with a crisis.

Keating said the council began exploring ways to hold informal meetings outside the council chamber in the early 1990s, at the height of the Bosnian conflict. In March 1992, a Bosnian priest asked to brief each of the council's 15 members on the violence in Bosnia. Only one envoy, **Diego Arria** of Venezuela, agreed to meet him. The council bars private citizens or NGOs from officially addressing the security body, but Arria was so moved by what he heard that he prevailed upon the council to listen to the priest over coffee in the U.N. delegates' lounge.

Since then, the U.N. has frequently held informal meetings under the so-called Arria Formula with human rights groups, humanitarian aid advocates, and other private groups or distinguished political figures.

Keating said that the trend toward convening informal meetings on politically delicate issues has picked up steam over the past year as the council has looked for ways to overcome opposition to formal meetings on hot-button issues. Sri Lanka, for instance, has refused to engage in discussions about the civil war in its country if the meetings were placed on the council's agenda.

China objected to South Korea and its allies briefing the council on evidence it has collected alleging a North Korean midget submarine torpedoed the Cheonan in March, killing 46 seamen. In a compromise, the Security Council organized "an informal interactive dialogue" that will not appear in the council's formal record as having occurred. China didn't ask a single question at the briefing.

Likewise, Russia had opposed holding a meeting on the ongoing crisis in Kyrgyzstan. But Moscow had no problem letting the council hold "informal consultations in connection with the UNRCCA (United Nations Regional Center for Preventative Diplomacy for Central Asia)" to talk about the ongoing crisis in Kyrgyzstan. Such compromises limit the level of engagement, according to Keating, but allow the council to "dip its toe in the water."