

Ms. Power (United States of America):

I thank you, Madam President, for taking up this important cause, as you have done throughout your career. Let me also take this occasion to welcome our new members: Sweden, Italy, Bolivia, Ethiopia and Kazakhstan. We look forward to working with each of them.

I welcome Secretary-General Guterres for his first briefing to the Security Council. We knew he would hit the ground running, but I am not sure that we knew that he would be doing so at an Olympic pace, so we congratulate him on his energy and the ambitious vision that he has brought to the cause of conflict prevention, conflict response and, as he put it, the cause of sustaining peace. I think that it is really important that he has wasted no time reforming the capacity of the United Nation to be more nimble in the face of the crises that confront us.

This debate is also timely for me personally, as it will be one of the last times that I have the honour of representing the United States in the Chamber. For the past eight years since he took office, President Barack Obama has been committed to showing United States leadership here at the United Nations. The United Nations matters as the only global institution dedicated to finding solutions to transnational threats and challenges that all of us face. The Security Council remains at the forefront.

The Council matters because 100,000 troops and police are deployed worldwide on the basis of our resolutions and our words. The Council matters because we make international law, we set standards, we authorize the use of force, we enable the delivery of life-saving humanitarian aid, and we impose financial sanctions and arms embargoes to address threats to international peace and security. We help set the rules for how States should behave. The Council matters because when we come together, as others have noted, we can respond to crises in ways no other institutions can.

But let us compare those capabilities with the reality of the world around us — the reality of suffering in places like Syria, South Sudan, Yemen, Libya, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi, Nigeria and Mali. It is obvious that we, as the Council, can do better. The question becomes this: When we have the tools, the authority and such a strong partner in the Secretary-General, what is holding us back? Why are we not delivering more? I want to make four points to explain how we, as members of the Security Council, can show leadership to narrow the gap between what this institution can achieve and where it has fallen short, particularly as it relates to prevention.

First, if we are serious about preventing conflict, the important principle of State sovereignty cannot be a straitjacket to keep the Security Council and the Secretary-General from taking necessary action to respond to urgent, life-threatening crises. No

Member of the United Nations would suggest that we dispense with respect for State sovereignty or that it is not an essential bedrock of the international order. It is. The United States aspires to a world of States that, as the Charter of the United Nations States, should “live together in peace with one another as good neighbours”.

Countries must respect one another. It is a very simple proposition. But sovereignty cannot be a shield to prevent outside scrutiny over actions taken in defiance of the principles in the Charter of the United Nations. We have seen too many countries invoking State sovereignty as a means of securing full impunity for themselves — impunity to do what they want to their own people, in defiance of the Charter, and impunity to do what they want to do, ironically, to their neighbours, in defiance of the Charter. In 2014, Russia violated the sovereignty of another State Member of the United Nations and current member of the Security Council, Ukraine, by invading and then attempting to annex Crimea, which Russia holds to this day. Yet Russia has suggested in the Chamber — and probably will again today — that failure to respect State sovereignty is the main driver of conflict, even as Russia has used its veto to insulate itself from consequences in the Council for trampling on Ukraine’s sovereignty.

The perversion of sovereignty undermines our work in less obvious ways. Let us take peacekeeping. We generally authorize peacekeepers only when

members of the Council see an imminent risk of mass violence — too often, as has been noted, after attacks have started. We are supposed to deploy Blue Helmets to help people, but in some cases Council members have suggested that peacekeepers should not do anything without checking first with the Governments that are responsible for harming their citizens, thereby warranting the deployment of peacekeepers in the first place.

In South Sudan, the Council authorized the urgent deployment of the Regional Protection Force (RPF) for the United Nations Mission in the Republic of South Sudan (UNMISS) last August to help restore security in the capital. The Government accepted the force. Five months later, not a single RPF soldier has been deployed, even as Government forces have continued killing civilians, used sexual violence as a systematic weapon of war, and positioned themselves to carry out large-scale mass atrocities. And the Government routinely blocks UNMISS patrols, to a point where UNMISS had to ask its permission to evacuate Chinese peacekeepers — permission that was not forthcoming, although the soldiers’ lives hung in the balance. That was sovereignty of a perverse kind being exercised when one of our own peacekeepers was in grave jeopardy. Yet there has been no further action by the Council showing South Sudan’s leaders that such obstruction has consequences.

I would like to anticipate the rebuttal to what I am saying. Some will accuse the United

States of also invoking sovereignty when it is convenient. And in the past, the United States has on occasion taken actions that contradicted the principle that people should be able to choose their own path. As President Obama made clear when he took office, the United States strives to lead by example. Sometimes we still fall short of what we could achieve through deeper multilateral cooperation. Indeed, we have a long-standing debate in our Congress about international human rights treaties, in which some argue that sovereignty precludes ratifying treaties such as the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, even when United States law already enshrines the treaty's standards. We strongly believe that we are better off — and better — when we strengthen the rule-based international order, and that means living by the norms that protect all of our common security and common humanity.

Secondly, if we are to sustain peace we first have to tell things as they are. We as diplomats have developed a lexicon of bureaucratic jargon that allows us to sidestep the issues that we are supposed to be tackling. Our statements in the Council fill up with empty phrases at the moments that demand the greatest precision and clarity. The result is that we often leave Security Council meetings without even knowing what each of us stands for. I recall all the times that our statements in the Council have used the passive voice. We say that dialogue must be pursued, violence must be ended, a ceasefire must be respected. How? By whom? Who has to do what? Let us be precise. We convene emergency meetings of the Council to discuss attacks by one party on another, but instead of doing the obvious — telling that party to stop — we dodge. We use the phrase “all parties” when we actually mean “one party”. We resort to lines such as “There is no military solution”, rather than identifying the actors who are pursuing a military solution.

Of course, words alone are not enough to stop suffering on the ground, but identifying who is responsible for abuses and violations of the Charter of the United Nations, in public, in the Council, is at least a modest form of accountability and an antidote to impunity. It may have some deterrent effect. It at least puts those responsible for violence on notice that we are watching. Now, I acknowledge that naming names can be harder for some countries than it is for a permanent member of the Security Council such as the United States. I completely understand those countries that say that they are afraid of retribution if they call out a larger, more powerful country for its actions. But that is precisely the reason to speak up, because all Member States are collectively more secure in a world where big and small Governments alike are held accountable for their actions.

Similarly, many on the Council focus on the importance of consensus. Again, for diplomats that is an understandable impulse and, as I said at the outset, we are so much stronger when we are united. But if our only goal is consensus, the risk is a lowest-common-denominator solution. That balance is tricky. In November, for example, when the Council renewed the mandate of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical

Weapons-United Nations Joint Investigative Mechanism to investigate the use of chemical weapons in Syria (see S/PV.7815), the United States spent weeks in painstaking negotiations with Russia on the terms. There was a similar negotiation process with China on the toughest-ever sanctions imposed on the Democratic

People's Republic of Korea after the Kim Jong Un regime conducted two nuclear tests this year (resolution 2321 (2016)). But in both cases the resolutions were valuable, not only because the Council adopted them unanimously but because of their impact — attributing responsibility for chemical-weapons use in Syria and cutting off sources of revenue to the nuclear and ballistic-missile programmes of the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.

We can contrast that with the recent Council resolution 2336 (2016), on Syria, aimed at monitoring evacuations from eastern Aleppo. We can trumpet reaching consensus on that resolution, but we have to be careful not to miss the point. The resolution was adopted at the very end of a merciless military assault on Aleppo by Russia and the Al-Assad regime, after Russia had twice used its veto to block calls for a ceasefire that would have saved countless lives. I want to be clear today that we are rooting wholeheartedly for the efforts that Russia and Turkey are making to achieve a ceasefire, and we agree with Russia that we in the Council should do what we can to support that effort. Anything that could save lives or reduce violence is something that we should look at and offer to support. But again, consensus is not the measure of our success. That measure is our impact and whether, given the articulation of a ceasefire, the Al-Assad regime has in fact stopped bombing civilian areas, notably the Damascus suburbs and Idlib, where such attacks continue as we sit here.

Thirdly, we as Member States should empower the Secretary-General and his team to do their jobs. Part of that means encouraging the Secretary-General to bring issues to the Council's attention, and the United States therefore strongly supports the Secretary-General's use of Article 99 of the Charter, so that he can more actively warn the Council, early and often, when he believes it is warranted. Of course, that means that the Secretary-General deserves respect for the decisions he takes in order to manage the Organization.

Let us consider the issue of sexual exploitation and abuse in peacekeeping missions, which Secretary-General Guterres has already made a top priority through the creation of a new task force. That is an issue where we ought to agree that the Secretary-General must be able to do everything possible to stamp out this scourge, including by repatriating the units responsible for widespread and systematic abuses. Resolution 2272 (2016), adopted last year, endorsed the then-Secretary-General's decision to use that authority. But we should remember that during those negotiations, several Council

members focused instead on how to limit the Secretary-General's powers to send troops home. We should think about that — countries that responded to the issue of sexual exploitation by trying to tie the Secretary-General's hands. That was their focus, not the protection of potential victims.

A similar principle should apply for holding peacekeepers accountable for implementing their mandates. We were all very concerned when UNMISS personnel were either incapable of or unwilling to respond to calls for help after South Sudanese soldiers attacked the Terrain compound in July. If, however, we demand more from the United Nations in sustaining peace, we must respect the Secretary-General's decisions — including his personnel decisions — to strengthen systems that fall short. The United States claims no special exemption here when it comes to empowering the Secretary-General. We supported the selection of António Guterres precisely because he was independent-minded and prepared to stand up for the principles of the United Nations Charter and against bullying and lawlessness among Member States.

I would like to make a final point about how we can push ourselves to use our capabilities as the Security Council in order to promote peace. We have to look for ways to hear from the actual people whose lives our decisions affect. Here in the Council, or over at the General Assembly, it is still out of the ordinary to hear a voice that is not that of a diplomat or bureaucrat. So our discussions become sterile. We lose sight of the human stakes that should drive our work. One might think that the unprecedented number of trips that the Security Council has taken in recent years would help us understand what actual people are facing — and they do help. But during those trips, believe it or not, we spend too much time sitting in formal, scripted conversations in conference room after conference room. Incredibly, some Member States here in New York want even less access for representatives of civil society to come in and share different perspectives. They fight accreditation requests to the Non-Governmental Organization Committee of the Economic and Social Council in order to block non-governmental organizations from being part of United Nations deliberations.

As Permanent Representative for the past three and a half years, I know that the Council's richest, most meaningful exchanges have come when we have heard from real people — when Nadia Murad Basee Taha, a Yazidi woman trafficked by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), implored the Council to take action because ISIL, in her words, was using rape “to ensure that women could never again lead a normal life” (*S/PV.7585, p.6*); or when Dr. Zaher Sahloul returned from eastern Aleppo to relay the pleas of the city's doctors that wounded children be allowed to be evacuated; or when Jackson Niamah, a Liberian health-care worker, briefed the Council (see *S/PV.7268*), at the height of the Ebola crisis, on the anguish of turning away infected patients and their children for a lack of supplies and beds. When we on the Council show leadership and

put people at the centre of our decisions, the effect is powerful. It can change minds.

We, as Council members, have helped keep people safe by adopting resolutions to cut off financing for terrorist organizations and to rally the world to stop the flow of foreign terrorist fighters. We helped enforce a rule against the use of chemical weapons when we adopted a resolution to dismantle the Al-Assad regime's stockpile of chemical weapons. We helped protect people from ethnic killings by deploying peacekeepers to the Central African Republic when a genocide seemed imminent. We helped set up a novel United Nations mission to fight the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, after delivering a wake-up call by holding our first-ever emergency meeting on a public health crisis here in the Council. The point is that the Council is essential. It is an essential tool for promoting a more peaceful world. But we need to work far harder and dig deep within ourselves to make sure that we use the capabilities at our disposal to help those who need us.