

NZ Foreign Minister blasts UN Security Council's 'too hard' attitude to big issues

Says competing national interests are to be expected, but that does not absolve responsibilities for global peace and security

TANG CHEE SENG
tangcheeseng@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE – New Zealand Foreign Minister Murray McCully yesterday hit out at the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) for not doing enough to resolve ongoing global conflicts, including the Syrian civil war and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Speaking at a lecture organised by the National University of Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy yesterday, Mr McCully said that while the UNSC has put its significant political weight behind valuable initiatives — such as the recent Iranian nuclear deal — the Council has “dealt itself out of several of the most pressing global issues because they are too hard”.

“The conflict in Syria is the clear-

est example of this. For five years, the Council has achieved very little — because it was too hard to navigate the various interests at stake. National positions became entrenched, with inexcusable consequences for the people of Syria,” he said, sharing his observations of Wellington's tenure as a non-permanent UNSC member for 2015 to 2016. “We need to see the Council put its political weight behind a negotiated end to the fighting. This means not shying away from the hard conversations, and it means being willing to make compromises.”

Now entering its sixth year of fighting, the Syrian civil war — which started during the 2011 Arab Spring protests against Syrian President Bashar Assad, before rapidly degenerating into violent conflict — has shown



Speaking at a lecture in Singapore yesterday, Mr Murray McCully said he favours the creation of a third category of UNSC membership that would give middle powers a voice on world issues. PHOTO: WEE TECK HIAN

little sign of ending. This is despite a partial ceasefire reached last month under international pressure between the Syrian government forces and an array of insurgent opponents. In recent months, Islamic State (IS) and the Al Qaeda-linked Nusra Front have exploited the chaos to claim territory in Syria and neighbouring Iraq.

While conceding that competing national interests were to be expected on the UNSC, Mr McCully said that the Council still has a responsibility to maintain international peace and security. He pointed out that the Middle East peace process between Israel and Palestine has been in limbo because members of the UNSC had constantly demurred from taking action — claiming that “now is not the right time”.

“While we wait, the situation (in Israel and Palestine) gets worse, and the viability of the two-state solution is disappearing. The reality is, it is unlikely ever to be a right time, and the parties may never be ready,” he said.

Multiple efforts have been made to broker an agreement on a “two-state

solution” in which Israel would exist peacefully alongside a new Palestinian state created in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, lands seized by Israel in the 1967 war. But after the failure of peace talks led by United States Secretary of State John Kerry in 2014, some believe neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians have the political will to revive the peace process. Mr McCully expressed hope that genuine moves can be made in reforming the world's top multilateral decision-making body, adding that the UNSC should focus more on conflict prevention rather than conflict management.

“There is something wrong when we are spending over US\$8 billion (S\$11 billion) per year on peacekeeping, and a further US\$10.5 billion on providing assistance to people affected by conflict, but virtually nothing on the prevention of situations escalating into intractable conflict,” he said.

Commenting on the ongoing debate over governance reforms in the UNSC — comprising 10 non-permanent members elected to serve two-year terms, as well as the five permanent members of Britain, China, France, Russia and the US — Mr McCully revealed that the permanent Council members tended to vigorously protect their prerogatives. This would include the power to veto any draft resolution, regardless of the level of international support for the draft.

Critics have argued that the composition of the Council no longer reflects current global geopolitical realities. Middle-powers such as Japan, Germany, Brazil, India and South Africa, among others, have lobbied for permanent membership in the UNSC.

To address this issue, Mr McCully favours the creation of a third category of UNSC membership, to be continuously occupied by middle powers that will have to contest among themselves for a seat. He said this will ensure that smaller countries, which wish to have their views heard by serving as non-permanent Council members, will not be sidelined.

“It's actually unhealthy to have small countries squeezed out of Council representation any more than has already been the case,” he said.