I met with Matthew Rycroft, the British Ambassador to the United Nations, on Wednesday November 10, the day after the election of Donald J. Trump as the 45th president of the United States. It was a gloomy day, raining and grey, and there was a sense of despondency and incredulity at the result around New Haven, Connecticut. Ambassador Rycroft was limited in what he could say about the election since was only a few hours since Trump's victory was confirmed, but the position of the British government was to welcome the new administration and reiterate that the ‘special relationship’ between the United States and Britain would endure.

Rycroft has had a full agenda since taking up one of Britain’s top diplomatic posts last year. His duties may yet become more complicated under President Trump, whose references to isolationism and disdain for multilateral organizations such as NATO have stoked fears that the United States could also turn away from the United Nations.

In this wide-ranging conversation, we discussed Russia’s role in Syria, the global spread of populism and the battle for female leadership within the United Nations.

Below is an abridged transcript of our conversation, edited for brevity.

Joshua Jacobs: Britain is pushing for United Nations reform, to add Japan, India, Germany, Brazil, and an African representative as permanent members of the Security Council. Are the regional rivals to these countries opposing this?

Matthew Rycroft: Each of those countries has countries that are adamantly opposed to them joining the Security Council. For the countries that oppose, the status quo may be bad enough, but to have their archrival or their big neighbor or their enemy added would make things even worse. There is one group that favors those countries and then another group made up of the opponents of those countries. There is a bit of a standoff. And that is one of the many reasons why nothing has happened in terms of new countries joining the Security Council for decades.

Russia prolonging war and making situations in Syria worse, British Ambassador tells YJIA

Interview with Matthew Rycroft

By Joshua Jacobs

The United Nations brings the world together. That carries on whoever is in power.

President Trump, whose references to isolationism and disdain for multilateral organizations such as NATO have stoked fears that the United States could also turn away from the United Nations.

In this wide-ranging conversation, we discussed Russia’s role in Syria, the global spread of populism and the battle for female leadership within the United Nations.

Below is an abridged transcript of our conversation, edited for brevity.

Joshua Jacobs: Britain is pushing for United Nations reform, to add Japan, India, Germany, Brazil, and an African representative as permanent members of the Security Council. Are the regional rivals to these countries opposing this?

Matthew Rycroft: Each of those countries has countries that are adamantly opposed to them joining the Security Council. For the countries that oppose, the status quo may be bad enough, but to have their archrival or their big neighbor or their enemy added would make things even worse. There is one group that favors those countries and then another group made up of the opponents of those countries. There is a bit of a standoff. And that is one of the many reasons why nothing has happened in terms of new countries joining the Security Council for decades.
JJ: You strongly advocated for a woman to be appointed the next United Nations Secretary General. In the end a man was chosen, António Guterres. Currently there is only one female Ambassador to the Security Council. What do these facts say about the fight for female leadership?

MR: Samantha Power is [the only female Ambassador to the United Nations Security Council] at the moment. When she leaves it is possible that it will be all fifteen men, which is extraordinary. I think it is very bad for the image of an out of date, secretive club. But the U.K. is one-fifteenth of that, so I am not blaming anyone else.

In terms of why we did not choose a woman to be Secretary General, I pushed hard. I said it was high time for a woman to run the United Nations, other things being equal. We chose António Guterres because he was the best candidate and I’m very glad that we did. We worked hard to get women into the field, seven out of thirteen candidates, a majority of the candidates were women. But in the end the process did identify the strongest candidate and, as it happens, it was a man.

JJ: More broadly, what are the forces holding back female leadership in politics? How can we see more progress in this area?

MR: There is a whole load of things. A lot of my experience with this come from being Chief Operation Officer of the U.K. Foreign Office. There is something in the stereotype that men put themselves forward for jobs on the off chance that they will get them whereas women tend to wait until they are absolutely sure that they are going to get something, absolutely sure that they are ready before putting themselves forward. Of course that’s a generalization, of course there are plenty of counterexamples, but on average that is what happens. On average more men put themselves forward, so on average more men get promotions, get big jobs and so on.

To counter that, what you need is a proactive strategy to encourage women to apply. I think women disproportionately are positively influenced by having someone who matters to them saying, “you should really go for this”. So having mentoring, sponsorship, all those sorts of things. In a closed market like the British Foreign Office, that works well.

JJ: I understand that you are limited in what you can say about the United States election results, but more generally how do you think the rise of populist and authoritarian forces will effect international cooperation, both within the United Nations and European European Union and bilaterally as well?

MR: I think that there is going to be a continued requirement for multilateralism and for organizations that bring different parts of the world together. The United Nations is the most supreme example of that because it brings the whole world together, literally:

I pushed hard. I said it was high time for a woman to run the United Nations.

JJ: You strongly advocated for a woman to be appointed the next United Nations Secretary General. In the end a man was chosen, António Guterres. Currently there is only one female Ambassador to the Security Council. What do these facts say about the fight for female leadership?

MR: Samantha Power is [the only female Ambassador to the United Nations Security Council] at the moment. When she leaves it is possible that it will be all fifteen men, which is extraordinary. I think it is very bad for the image of an out of date, secretive club. But the U.K. is one-fifteenth of that, so I am not blaming anyone else.

In terms of why we did not choose a woman to be Secretary General, I pushed hard. I said it was high time for a woman to run the United Nations, other things being equal. We chose António Guterres because he was the best candidate and I’m very glad that we did. We worked hard to get women into the field, seven out of thirteen candidates, a majority of the candidates were women. But in the end the process did identify the strongest candidate and, as it happens, it was a man.

JJ: More broadly, what are the forces holding back female leadership in politics? How can we see more progress in this area?

MR: There is a whole load of things. A lot of my experience with this come from being Chief Operation Officer of the U.K. Foreign Office. There is something in the stereotype that men put themselves forward for jobs on the off chance that they will get them whereas women tend to wait until they are absolutely sure that they are going to get something, absolutely sure that they are ready before putting themselves forward. Of course that’s a generalization, of course there are plenty of counterexamples, but on average that is what happens. On average more men put themselves forward, so on average more men get promotions, get big jobs and so on.

To counter that, what you need is a proactive strategy to encourage women to apply. I think women disproportionately are positively influenced by having someone who matters to them saying, “you should really go for this”. So having mentoring, sponsorship, all those sorts of things. In a closed market like the British Foreign Office, that works well.

JJ: I understand that you are limited in what you can say about the United States election results, but more generally how do you think the rise of populist and authoritarian forces will effect international cooperation, both within the United Nations and European European Union and bilaterally as well?

MR: I think that there is going to be a continued requirement for multilateralism and for organizations that bring different parts of the world together. The United Nations is the most supreme example of that because it brings the whole world together, literally:
193 countries. And that is enduring. It carries on whoever is in power in any of those countries, including the world's only superpower and host country of the United Nations. Over the seventy-one years that it has been in existence, it has had a very wide range of U.S. governments. None of them have prevented the United Nations from working. So, yes, there are some downs, but the U.N. will continue to be a place to set the norms, and to do a lot of delivery, aid, poverty reduction and humanitarian work. All of that I think will carry on, irrespective of any country's views on those issues.

I think the areas where it will be interesting to see what happens are to do with the big conflicts in the news: Syria most obviously. The whole U.S.-Russia relationship has a very significant relationship on how the Security Council works. Broadly speaking, the Security Council works when the permanent members can agree on something and it just doesn't when we can't. So that is I think a potential area of flux.

JJ: You have been a forthright advocate for passing resolutions against Syria, walking out of the Security Council several times in protest at the situation in that country. You've also been a stalwart critic of the use of chemical weapons. But it seems like there is no military enforcement mechanism to prevent their use.

MR: I have walked out three times now. Russia has chosen militarily to back the Assad regime and countries on the other side have chosen not to provide full military backing. There is some support to the opposition -- the United States has provided a lot, the United Kingdom has provided some things -- but that is not the same as having our troops present on the ground or in the air over Syria. And that is not going to change any time soon. So, what we need to do is to concentrate on other areas of influence, bearing in mind that there is a military mismatch in Assad's favor.

JJ: President Putin has criticized a process that he sees as framing Western norms, such as sovereignty and non-intervention, in global terms. To what extent is that true and to what extent is it posturing, to distract from certain behaviors in places like Syria?

MR: You are right that there is a huge battle of framing and re-framing going on. Russia is seeking to make this about fighting terrorism and we are seeking to make this about ending the war in Syria. So from their point of view what they are doing is right because it is tackling terrorism, and from our point of view what they are doing is wrong because it is prolonging the war in Syria. Not only is it not fighting terrorism, it is actually making the Syria situation worse, and I have never heard a convincing response to that.

JJ: You were private secretary to British Prime Minister Tony Blair during the Iraq War. To what extent do you see the backlash against intervention as a result of Iraq having gone too far, and having promoted a noninterventionist impulse on Syria?

MR: Throughout my career and before, and probably after as well, there is a pendulum that swings in different directions on this sort of issue. So in the time of my career we have had a phase of under-intervening in the Western Balkans, Bosnia in particular. We
learned from that and we arguably over-intervened in Iraq and Afghanistan, and as a result [U.S. President Barack] Obama came in and chose not to intervene as strongly in places like Syria. And so it will carry on.

**ABOUT THE INTERVIEWEE**

Matthew Rycroft has represented Britain as the Permanent Representative to the United Nations since 25 April 2015. From March 2011, Rycroft was the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Chief Operating Officer and from 2002 to 2004 he was Private Secretary to Prime Minister Tony Blair for Foreign Affairs, covering all foreign, European, Northern Ireland and defense issues in 10 Downing Street (the Prime Minister’s office).